

ARISTOTLE ON HAPPINESS:
A COMPARISON WITH CONFUCIUS

A Dissertation
presented to
the Faculty of the Graduate School
University of Missouri – Columbia

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

by
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AUGUST 2006

This dissertation is dedicated to my husband, Troy M. Nunley, and to our child in utero.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank everyone without which the writing of my dissertation would not be possible. Troy, my beloved husband and best friend, thanks for putting up with me for a year and nearly eleven months of trudging through research, writing, thinking through various ideas, more writing, complaining, and wondering whether this would ever be finished. Your moral support has meant so much to me. Christine Poston, my best friend, thanks for your prayers and your continued and unfailing support. That you believed in my abilities throughout this journey, at times, was one of the few things that kept me together. My family — my dad and mom, Tenny, Troy's mom and dad, Aaron, Jenny, and Becky — thank you for believing that I had the intellectual ability to write a good dissertation and that finishing my Ph.D. was only a matter of time. Thank you to our small group from church, the Crossing, for faithfully praying for me throughout my writing process. Last but not least, thank you Dr. Bina Gupta for mentoring me through the writing of my dissertation, and thank you committee members — Dr. Jack Kultgen, Dr. Bill Bondeson, Dr. Joe Bien, and Dr. Barbara Wallach — for discussing my dissertation with me and providing me with helpful insight. To everyone else that I have forgotten to name, thank you so much for your support through this writing process.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	ii
ABSTRACT	iii

Chapter

1. INTRODUCTION	1
Happiness & Non-Philosophers' Interpretations of Happiness	
Buddha and <i>Dukkha</i>	
Confucius and Virtue Ethics	
Aristotle and <i>Eudaimonia</i>	
Bentham and Mill on Pleasure as Happiness	
The Importance of Happiness in Ethics	
A Look Ahead – The Plan	
2. THE NATURE OF HAPPINESS	31
Preliminary Remarks on the Nature of Happiness	
Two Criteria for Happiness	
Popular Views of Happiness	
The <i>Ergon</i> Argument	
An Objection to the Activity of Reasoning being the <i>Ergon</i> of Human Beings Considered	
The Activity of Contemplation	
Virtuous Activity	

An Objection Against my Interpretation of the Nature of Happiness
Considered

How Virtuous Activity is a Part of the Nature of Happiness

3. FRIENDSHIP AND THE NATURE OF HAPPINESS 71

Qualities of Friendship

Three Main Types of Friendship

How Virtuous Friendship is Part of the Nature of Happiness

A Couple of Objections Considered

4. EXTERNAL GOODS 90

Friends

Wealth

Political Power

Good Birth, Good Children, and Beauty

Pleasure

Happiness after Death

5. CONFUCIUS 111

The Good for Humankind

Virtuous Activity Needed for Living the Good Life

Ren

Li

Dao

Yi

The Importance of Education in Living the Good Life

A Comparison of Aristotle's and Confucius' Approaches to Virtue Ethics

6. ARISTOTLE AND CONFUCIUS ON VIRTUE ETHICS 132

Virtue Ethics and the Good for Humankind

Virtue

The Importance of Activity in Becoming Good or Virtuous

The Importance of Education in Learning How and Why Acts are
Virtuous

The Importance of Laws and the Enforcement of Laws to Motivate People
to become Virtuous

7. CONCLUSION 152

Intellectual Activity, Virtuous Activity, and the Nature of Happiness

Friendship and the Nature of Happiness

External Goods Needed for Happiness

Confucius

Aristotle and Confucius on Virtue Ethics

BIBLIOGRAPHY 164

VITA 172

Chapter 1 – Introduction

It is not an exaggeration to say most of us desire a good life. We think of a good life as consisting of goods, ranging from pleasure to wealth. At the same time, we also believe that a good life involves some sort of cultivation. One of the most obvious examples of this is the amount of time and attention good parents devote to raising their children and making sure they develop in character. Though people are likely to give significantly different responses to the question of what exactly counts as a good life, they will probably agree that the good life and happiness share an intimate relationship. People spend a significant part of their lives pursuing goals they believe will bring them happiness. What constitutes happiness and how is happiness attained? Unfortunately, these questions not so easily answered, given that several attempts to answer those questions have failed.

Happiness and Non-Philosophers' Interpretations of Happiness

Many ordinary people, for instance, have tried to determine what constitutes happiness and to pursue it according to their conception(s) of happiness. By ordinary people, I mean everyone except those, especially philosophers, who study happiness. People pursue pleasure, wealth, promotions, or various possessions, believing the accomplishment of these goals

of these goods will make them happy. Unfortunately, once they reach these goals and possess these goods, oftentimes they discover that they are still not happy.

One possible explanation of this unfortunate situation is that perhaps some of these goals or possessions, though necessary for happiness, are not enough for happiness. Certainly it is conceivable that a certain degree of wealth, at the very least enough for survival basics – such as food, shelter, and clothing – is necessary for happiness. But, that basic degree of wealth alone is not sufficient for happiness. We need something more, whatever that may be, to be happy.

Another possible explanation is that ordinary people, for the most part, are mistaken about what constitutes happiness. Think about the desires of little children as an illustration of how people can be and oftentimes are mistaken, in general, about what is good. As a child, I loved eating candy. I separated all my candy into various stashes and stacks, constantly deciding from which I would pick something to eat next. What worsened the situation was the fact that I inherited the genes of having teeth very prone to developing cavities. As a child, I desired candy often and thought getting what I wanted to be of the utmost importance. The very thought of not being able to indulge in candy was quite upsetting to me. My parents saw matters quite differently. They were much more interested in taking care of my teeth and believed that continually eating

candy was being a poor steward of my teeth. They were quite reluctant to give in to my moment to moment desires for candy. I do not bring up this example as an analogy but merely as an illustration.

This is to say that it is possible that many of us are mistaken about how to achieve happiness, and certainly more, what constitutes happiness. Many of us mistakenly believe that having lots of money will be the solution to our problems; if only we have a large stash of money, many of life's problems would go away and we would be happy. Then, there are many who believe that getting various physical pleasures will make them happy, yet satisfaction is at best momentary. It is quite plausible that money alone or physical pleasure exclusively is not sure to make us happy.

Let me leave discussion of problems ordinary people face in their pursuits of happiness. Philosophers far and wide also have been concerned with matters of practical significance. Early on, philosophers, amongst other things, were interested in the good life and the means of achieving the good life. Some define the good life in terms of happiness. Others describe the good life in terms of avoiding pain or suffering. Buddha, Confucius, and Aristotle, just to name a few, were some of the early philosophers that developed teachings on the topic.

[Buddha] declared that those who wish to lead pure life should avoid the two extremes of self-indulgence (*kāmasukhallikānuyoga*) and self-torture (*attakilamathānuyoga*). He said: "Self-indulgence is low, vulgar, ignoble and harmful, and self-mortification is painful,

ignoble and harmful—both are profitless.” In fact the former surely retards one’s spiritual progress and the latter weakens one’s intellect.¹

Buddhism and *dukkha*

Take Buddhism as an example. Though Buddhism does not mention happiness per se, it is concerned with the good life. Buddhism places heavy emphasis on issues of well-being. Living a good life, according to Buddha, involves avoiding extremes, specifically self-indulgence and self-torture. Hammalawa Saddhatissa, in *Buddhist Ethics*, mentions the following regarding Buddha’s first sermon, “Discourse of Setting in Motion the Wheel of the Doctrine”: “[Buddha] declared that those who wish to lead a pure life should avoid the two extremes of self-indulgence (*kāmasukhallikānuyoga*) and self-torture (*attakilamathānuyoga*).”²

Buddha was interested in eliminating the suffering and dissatisfaction of people and centered his teachings on this. Once people successfully eliminate suffering in their lives, such lives are good lives, according to Buddha. He offered a method by which people can eradicate suffering from their lives.

¹ Hammalawa Saddhatissa, *Buddhist Ethics*, Intro. by Charles Hallisey (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1997), 44.

² Ibid.

One main teaching of Buddhism is *dukkha*. *Dukkha* means suffering, incompleteness, dissatisfaction, discontent, opposite of well-being, opposite of bliss. Several doctrines of Buddhism focus on *dukkha*, including but not limited to recognizing the cause of *dukkha* and eliminating *dukkha*. The Four Noble Truths, for example, talk about the existence of *dukkha*, the cause of *dukkha*, the elimination of *dukkha*, and the path that leads to the cessation of *dukkha* (this path is called the Eightfold Path). The main idea supporting the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path is that once persons identify and understand what *dukkha* is, they can begin the process of eliminating it from their lives.

Confucius and virtue ethics

Buddha was not the only early philosopher concerned with living a good life in general. Confucius does not give any sort of prominence to happiness, but he was very much interested in searching for the good life. He was looking for a solution to the social disorder of his time. A couple of his main interests included determining how to live a good life and teaching others how to live a good life. Confucius's solution to the social disorder was to return to the practices of the Zhou dynasty.

His solution basically consists in an appeal to virtue ethics. Living a good life involves participating in activities that build good character. The consistent

and habitual practice of certain activities helps a person become a good person, but, other sorts of activities prevent a person from becoming a good person.

Activities conducive towards building a good character includes: acting with *ren* or authoritative conduct, performing *li* or ritual propriety consistent with the practices of the Zhou dynasty, living in accordance with the *dao*, and doing what is *yi* or appropriate. *Ren* — which is frequently translated as authoritative conduct, goodness, benevolence, humaneness, or authoritative person — sometimes is used in reference to a particular virtue we should cultivate, namely love. Other times, *ren* refers to an ethical ideal that a person should strive to attain; such an ethical ideal is reachable by cultivating virtues. Both of these senses of *ren* are important to living a good life or developing a good character.

The role *li* — oftentimes translated as ritual, rites, customs, etiquette, propriety, ritual propriety, morals, rules of behavior, or worship — plays in living the good life is that we must conform to the customs or ritual propriety of the Zhou dynasty. By *dao*, Confucius is referring to the way of the ancients, mainly the founders of the Zhou Dynasty. A virtuous person lives according to the way of the *dao*. Virtuous persons or *jun zi* have developed the sort character such that they habitually and consistently practice all of these activities.

In contrast, certain activities hinder the development of a good character. Such activities include: focusing on personal gain, seeking money exclusively, or

pursuing personal advantage. These activities, over time, not only distract but destroy a person's ability to do activities that develop a good character.

At any rate, according to Confucius, living the good life or becoming a good person involves pursuing certain activities habitually and consistently. The activities a person pursues to become a good person include: acting with *ren*, performing *li*, living in accordance with the *dao*, and doing what is *yi*. When a person is motivated by the good and engages in such activities, that person's life is considered good.

Aristotle and *eudaimonia*

As for Aristotle, he was very much interested in the nature of *eudaimonia*. He devoted a large part of the *Nicomachean Ethics* to developing a conception of *eudaimonia*. The Greek term is most frequently translated as happiness or human flourishing. Exactly what Aristotle means by *eudaimonia* — happiness or human flourishing — is somewhat controversial, among Aristotelian scholars.

Let me begin by discussing human flourishing as a translation for *eudaimonia*. Flourishing does not seem to be the preferable translation for at least a couple reasons. First of all, flourishing is not unique to human beings. Plants and animals flourish. In contrast, insofar as *eudaimonia* is concerned, it applies exclusively to human beings and divine beings. Richard Kraut makes a similar

point in “Two Conceptions of Happiness.” He says, “When ‘flourishing’ is used in common speech, it is most often attached to nonhuman subjects: ant colonies, flowers, towns, businesses, etc. Nonhuman subjects, such as ant colonies, flowers, towns, and businesses are much more likely to be called flourishing than human beings. *Eudaimonia*, on the other hand, is attributed only to human and divine persons.”³

What does it mean for something to flourish? To flourish, according to Webster’s Dictionary, means to grow luxuriantly or to thrive.⁴ Flourish also means to achieve success or prosper.⁵ Plants flourish given an appropriate amount of light, water, and sustenance (for example, good soil). Animals also flourish, given appropriate resources. For instance, a kitten thrives when it has adequate food, water, and a good environment in which to grow. What does it mean for human beings to flourish? We do not normally associate human flourishing merely with eating well, drinking well, or being exposed to light. Rather, we oftentimes associate human flourishing with particular activities. A person is more likely to flourish musically if she has a time and opportunity to practice. Given our present understanding of the term, flourish, a bad or evil person can thrive in certain circumstances. And Kraut is keen to notice that this

³ Richard Kraut, “Two Conceptions of Happiness,” *The Philosophical Review* 88 (April 1979): 169 – footnote 7.

⁴ *Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*, 9th edition, s.v. flourish.

⁵ *Ibid.*

is the case. “[A]rtists do not flourish in military dictatorships, pornographers flourish in democracies, and evil men flourish when moral standards are too lax or too strict.”⁶

In contrast, a person cannot be *eudaimon* in at least one situation. A bad or evil person cannot be *eudaimon*. One indication of this is that a person must be virtuous, according to Aristotle, to be *eudaimon*. The fact that a bad person can flourish but a bad person cannot be *eudaimon* is a second reason why human flourishing is not a preferred translation for *eudaimonia*.

I am not hereby claiming that happiness as the preferred translation of *eudaimonia* wins by default. Neither am I arguing that happiness, as a translation of *eudaimonia*, is without any difficulties. Let me first mention a couple of seeming difficulties with translating *eudaimonia* as happiness.

First of all, numerous persons associate the term, happiness, with some sort of feelings, such as pleasure. This is not so problematic for happiness as an adequate translation of *eudaimonia*. Indeed, many people think of happiness as pleasure. But, people also understand happiness as more than merely the feeling and attainment of pleasure. When one person wishes another happiness and prosperity, by happiness, the person means more than the feeling of pleasure. Unlike pleasure by itself, happiness is more enduring or long-lasting. In

⁶ Richard Kraut, “Two Conceptions of Happiness,” 169 — footnote 7.

particular, people think of happiness also in terms of the fulfillment of certain desires and the achievement of various goals.

However, like happiness, Aristotle's conception of *eudaimonia* is not completely devoid of pleasure. Though pleasure is not the goal of *eudaimonia*, according to Aristotle, pleasure comes as a result of pursuing what is necessary for *eudaimonia*. For instance, pleasure comes as a result of pursuing friendships, doing virtuous acts, or participating in intellectual activity. More accurately, an *eudaimon* person experiences pleasure from pursuing friendships, doing virtuous acts, and participating in intellectual activity.

Just as happiness is thought of, in part, as a fulfillment of the achievement of various goals, likewise, Aristotle's conception of *eudaimonia* involves the achievement of particular goals. In the case of *eudaimonia*, as I will argue through the course of this dissertation, it involves the attainment of virtuous friendships, pursuit of virtuous activity, participation in intellectual activity, and the possession of certain external goods.

One significant point of difference between our ordinary conception of happiness and Aristotle's conception of *eudaimonia* concerns how we judge a person to be happy or to be *eudaimon*. Frequently, happiness is interpreted as a subjective conception, but *eudaimonia* is thought of as an objective conception. That is, happiness is achieved by a person, given that she fulfills, to some extent,

her desires and achieves goals she has set for herself. The desires and goals vary from person to person. Thus, what is necessary for persons to be happy varies, according to particular desires and goals of the individuals.

On the contrary, *eudaimonia*, for Aristotle, is attained by persons that fulfill certain necessary conditions for *eudaimonia*. For persons to be *eudaimon*, they must have virtuous friends, engage in virtuous activity, participate in intellectual activity, and possess particular external goods. To a large extent, what is necessary for persons to be *eudaimon* is the same for everyone. That is, everyone must pursue virtuous friendships, engage in virtuous activity, participate in intellectual activity, and possess external goods to be *eudaimon*. The exact details of those activities can vary, depending on the person and circumstance. For instance, insofar as virtuous activity is concerned, how a virtue plays out depends on the situation. Take one virtue for example. Friendliness, a virtue related to social intercourse, involves exercising an appropriate amount of passion or affection for one's associate, for the right person, at the right time. The details of exhibiting friendliness in one situation may differ from the details of demonstrating friendliness in another situation.

Back to the topic of happiness as a good translation of *eudaimonia*, an important inquiry is whether the difference in conceptions of *eudaimonia* and happiness, one being objective and the other subjective, is sufficient to

demonstrate that happiness is not a good translation of *eudaimonia*. The short answer to that question is no. Such a difference merely demonstrates a difference in conceptions of happiness. A number of philosophers accept the translation of *eudaimonia* as happiness. For instance, James Dybikowski, in "Is Aristotelian 'Eudaimonia' Happiness," accepts happiness as an adequate translation of *eudaimonia*.⁷ Richard Kraut, in "Two Conceptions of Happiness," accepts *eudaimonia*'s translation as happiness but presents what he believes to be a preferred conception of happiness. He argues in favor of a subjective conception of happiness over Aristotle's objective conception of happiness.⁸ Kraut argues that Aristotle's conception of happiness is not as preferable because persons do not qualify as *eudaimon* unless they fulfill all that is necessary for happiness: having virtuous friendships, participating in virtuous activity, etc. To use Kraut's words, "To summarize, let me turn back once more to Aristotle: his differences from us stem from the fact that he calls someone *eudaimon* only if that person comes fairly close to the ideal life for all human beings, whereas our standard of happiness is more subjective and flexible."⁹ Given that Kraut's conception of happiness is more flexible insofar as it allows for severely handicapped individuals and slaves to be happy. Back to the point of whether

⁷ James C. Dybikowski, "Is Aristotelian 'Eudaimonia' Happiness?" *Dialogue: Canadian Philosophical Review* (June 1981): 185-200.

⁸ Richard Kraut, "Two Conceptions of Happiness," *The Philosophical Review* 88 (April 1979): 167-197.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 196.

the difference in conceptions, one being subjective and the other being objective, is sufficient to claim that happiness is not a good translation of *eudaimonia*, I think not. What philosophers are debating, on this matter, is not that happiness fails to work as a good translation of *eudaimonia*, but rather, that Aristotle's conception of *eudaimonia* has a problematic consequence.

Another important point to consider in favor of using happiness as an acceptable and good translation of *eudaimonia* is that whatever the dispute in interpreting Aristotle's conception of *eudaimonia* may be, what is required for *eudaimonia* and for happiness are one and the same. Whether Aristotelian scholars are talking about what is needed for *eudaimonia* or what is needed for happiness in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, they examine the same text or passages and consider the same criteria.¹⁰ I will talk about what that material is or what those criteria are later. Since *eudaimonia* and happiness point toward the same requirements, I shall henceforth use happiness to refer to Aristotle's conception of *eudaimonia*.

¹⁰ These are just a few examples – Howard Curzer, “Criteria for Happiness in Nichomachean Ethics I.7 and X.6-8,” *Classical Quarterly* 40 (1990): 421-423. Gary M. Gurtler, “The Activity of Happiness in Aristotle's Ethics,” *Review of Metaphysics* 56 (June 2003): 801-834. John K. Kearney, “Happiness and the Unity of the Nicomachean Ethics Reconsidered,” *Proceedings and the Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 40 (1966): 135-143. Ronna Burger, “Wisdom, Philosophy, and Happiness: On Book X of Aristotle's Ethics,” *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy* 6 (1990): 289-307. Daniel Devereux, “Aristotle on the Essence of Happiness,” *Studies in Aristotle*, ed. by Dominic J. O'Meara (Washington D.C.: Catholic University Press, 1981): 247-260. T. H. Irwin, “The Structure of Aristotelian Happiness,” *Ethics* 101 (January 1991): 382-291. Jeffrey S. Purinton, “Aristotle's Definition of Happiness (*NE* I.7, 1098a16-18),” *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 16 (1988): 259-297.

Aristotle defines happiness as the highest good or the supreme good for humankind. Aristotle points out that the supreme good is final. But then, he distinguishes different degrees of finality.

In speaking of degrees of finality, we mean that a thing pursued as an end in itself is more final than one pursued as a means to something else, and that a thing never chosen as a means to anything else is more final than things chosen both as ends in themselves and as means to that thing; and accordingly a thing chosen always as an end and never as a means we call absolutely final.¹¹

Happiness, according to Aristotle, is absolutely final. “Now happiness above all else appears to be absolutely final in this sense, since we always choose it for its own sake and never as a means to something else . . . ”¹² A happy person is not one who does some acts here and there, and as a result, is happy. Rather, a person cultivates a life of happiness by consistently doing various actions and living life a certain way. In particular, Aristotle defines happiness, in part, in terms of some function unique to human beings. For he says, “Perhaps then we may arrive at [a more explicit account of what constitutes happiness] by ascertaining what is man’s function.”¹³ By process of elimination, Aristotle reaches the conclusion that what is characteristic to human beings has to do with our reasoning capacity. “There remains therefore what may be called the

¹¹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, in The Loeb Classical Library, trans. by H. Rackham, ed. Jeffrey Henderson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), Book I Chapter I, p. 27 — 1097a31-b1.

¹² *Ibid.*, Book I Chapter 1, pp. 27 & 29 — 1097b1-4.

¹³ *Ibid.*, Book I Chapter 1, p. 31 — 1097b23-25.

practical life of the rational part of man.”¹⁴ Being happy, at the very least, involves reasoning well, whether about philosophical concerns or practical matters. Happiness involves participating in intellectual activity and in virtuous activity, respectively.

Happiness is not possible without the community. Intellectual activity is part of the nature of happiness. Aristotle says this on a number of occasions. For instance, he says, “And that happiness consists in contemplation may be accepted as agreeing both with the results already reached and with the truth.”¹⁵ Strictly speaking, a person can engage in intellectual activity without the presence of others. However, people are better able to engage in intellectual activity, such as philosophical contemplation, when they are able to discuss such matters with others. Another good necessary for happiness is virtuous activity. “Now with those who pronounce happiness to be virtue, or some particular virtue,” claims Aristotle, “our definition is in agreement; for ‘activity in conformity with virtue’ involves virtue.”¹⁶ Concerning a number of the virtues, the presence of others is necessary for a person to participate in virtuous activity; that is, there needs to be people at the receiving end of the virtuous activity. A person does not have the chance to be courageous if there are no people to fight in battle. A person cannot be liberal, giving the right amount of money to the

¹⁴ Ibid., Book I Chapter 1, p. 31 — 1098a4-5.

¹⁵ Ibid., Book X, Chapter 7, p. 613 — 1177a18-20.

¹⁶ Ibid., Book I Chapter 8, p. 39 — 1098b30-32.

right person at the right time, if there are no persons to who money can be given.

A third good that constitutes the nature of happiness is virtuous friendships.

According to Aristotle, "Therefore to be happy a man needs virtuous friends."¹⁷

Obviously, a person needs another person with whom to be friends. But,

friendships offer further benefits. Friendships among virtuous persons provide

excellent opportunities for people to engage in philosophical contemplation and

to participate in practical deliberation together. Besides talking about what

constitutes the nature of happiness, certain other goods are necessary for

happiness to be possible. "Nevertheless it is manifest that happiness also

requires external goods, in addition, as we said; for it is impossible, or at least not

easy, to play a noble part unless furnished with the necessary equipment."¹⁸

From examples that I have mentioned – Buddha, Confucius, and Aristotle

– it should be obvious that the good life was definitely of concern to them.

Happiness is a topic that continues to generate much discussion among

philosophers. In more recent times, relatively speaking, various philosophers

have defined happiness in different ways, such as physical pleasure or pleasure

in general.

¹⁷ Ibid., Book IX Chapter 9, p. 565 — 1170b18-19

¹⁸ Ibid., Book I Chapter 8, p. 43 — 1099a31-b1.

Bentham and Mill on pleasure as happiness

Jeremy Bentham defined happiness in terms of pleasure. He defined the good in terms of the greatest happiness or pleasure for the greatest number of people. In talking about the good, unlike Buddha, Confucius, and Aristotle; Bentham evaluates goodness or rightness in terms of particular acts, in contrast to talking about goodness in terms of ways of life. While Buddha, Confucius, and Aristotle each were interested in determining the good life, more recent philosophers like Bentham are more concerned with evaluating the good in terms of individual acts. What makes an act good or right? For Bentham, an act is right if and only if it produces the greatest amount of happiness for the greatest number of people. A person's own interests and the interests of others need to be weighed in calculating which act produces the greatest amount of pleasure for any given circumstance. Since happiness reduces to pleasure, for Bentham, the act with consequences that produces the greatest amount of pleasure is right.

Like Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill defines a good or right act in terms of the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people and defines happiness in terms of pleasure. But, from there, their particular approaches to Utilitarianism differ significantly. I will mention a couple of ways in which their approaches differ.

First, whereas Bentham writes about pleasure in general, Mill makes a distinction between higher and lower pleasures. The former are pleasures associated with the mental faculties; examples of such pleasures include: reading, doing problem-solving activities, and art. The latter are associated with physical pleasures, including sexual intercourse, massages, sleeping, and pleasures associated with eating and drinking.

In making a distinction between higher pleasures and lower pleasures, Mill avoids the objection that Utilitarianism is a doctrine worthy of swine. Mill is not suggesting that we pursue pleasures like swine do exclusively — eat, drink, and sleep. Rather, we must also pursue and enjoy higher pleasures. In fact, according to Mill, we actually and ought to prefer higher pleasures to lower pleasures. The way we know this is that people who have experienced both prefer the former to the latter. I do not find Mill's evidence of how we come to prefer higher pleasures to lower pleasures convincing, but that is beyond the scope of my present discussion.

Second, Mill differs from Bentham insofar as the pleasure calculus is concerned. Instead of calculating the greatest amount of pleasure for the greatest number of people in each individual circumstance, Mill points out that we can learn from the history of humankind. That is, we can tell, by looking at history, what sorts of acts generally bring pleasure and what sorts of acts result in pain.

So, we do not have to do calculations for every single act. But, to bring the discussion back to the topic of happiness, some philosophers, such as Bentham and Mill, define happiness in terms of pleasure.

Let me now turn to a problem with defining happiness as pleasure. This is commonly called the hedonistic paradox. The person pursuing pleasure, with pleasure as the goal, exclusively, is least likely to be happy. In contrast, those who focus on other things — such as beauty, music, art, friendship, reading, or intellectual activity — are more likely to be happy. Thus, to avoid such a difficulty, a conception of happiness should not recommend the exclusive pursuit and focus on pleasure.

The importance of happiness in ethics

What does happiness have to do with ethics? The short answer to that very complicated question is that happiness has much to do with ethics. With relatively recent philosophers writing about theories of ethics, such as John Stuart Mill and Immanuel Kant, the focus has been placed on individual acts. Right and wrong are determined by particular aspects of an act. According to Mill, an act is right or wrong based on the consequences of an act. In particular, an act is right if and only if it maximizes the greatest amount of pleasure for everyone involved. For Kant, an act is right or wrong based on the motives with

which the act is performed. An act is right if and only if it is performed for the sake of duty. Something seems to be missing from these theories of ethics. What about the person who is performing the acts? The character of the person is important. Persons should have the sort of character that consistently participates in intellectual activity, performs virtuous acts, and forms virtuous friendships.

The sort of character a person has, I believe, should not be ignored in discussions concerning ethics. As children, our parents and teachers teach us to act a certain way. We are taught to share with others, to help others when they need our help, to tell the truth, to be nice to others, etc. And, if all goes well, we develop the habit of responding in those ways. We learn to help others for their sake. We call people who have developed such habits good people. So, a good person is not simply one who performs a single right act. But rather, a good person is an individual who has the disposition to do the good act or the virtuous act in various circumstances and habitually does what is virtuous. Aristotle realizes that character has some bearing on happiness. For this reason, I find Aristotle's approach to ethics particularly attractive. Not only does he recognize the importance of character in ethics, but also, he explicates a good life.

Happiness is the highest good, according to Aristotle. Thus, a person that is happy has achieved the highest good. Happiness frequently is taken to mean

pleasure or some similar sort of sensation. But, what Aristotle means by happiness is totally different. When Aristotle claims that the highest good is happiness, he is not referring to happiness merely as some sort of sensation. Rather, happiness, he claims, is a complex notion involving much more. Aristotle believes that everything in nature has a unique purpose. And, happiness, in part, has to do with the characteristic function of human beings. Amongst other things, a person that is happy is performing or utilizing a function that is unique to human beings. Although that is not the most conventional use of happiness in the English speaking world, I think Aristotle is very much on the mark. And, my goal is to carefully define Aristotle's conception of happiness and to explain how he has a good conception for happiness.

A Look Ahead — The Plan

My intent is to begin by explaining what the nature of happiness is, according to Aristotle. In Chapter Two, I start by defining the nature of happiness. Happiness is participating in intellectual activity, performing virtuous activities, and engaging in friendships. Chapter Two focuses on the first two aspects of the nature of happiness. Happiness, in part, is defined by what Aristotle calls the *ergon* of human beings. The *ergon* of human beings refers to

that which is characteristic or unique to human beings. What is unique to humans, in contrast with plants or other animals, is our reasoning ability. Human beings have the ability to utilize this reasoning capacity, whether by engaging in intellectual activity or practical reasoning. The former includes using one's reasoning capacity in a more abstract fashion, say, by participating in philosophical contemplation and philosophical discussions. The latter involves a more practical application of one's reasoning ability, such as knowing how to act virtuously and actually acting virtuously.

Besides defining happiness partially in terms of the *ergon* of human beings, the nature of happiness also includes virtues of character. Virtue of character is intimately tied with practical wisdom. By employing practical wisdom, a person figures out what to do — taking into account the right persons, the right amount, at the right time, for the right cause, in the right way. Also, a morally mature person, by employing practical wisdom, in addition to knowing what the virtuous act is in a given circumstance, knows why (or how) the act is virtuous.

Some might object to my claim that virtuous activity or friendship, for that matter, is a part of the nature of happiness. Some Aristotelian scholars claim that the nature of happiness includes intellectual activity exclusively. Such a view, claiming that the nature of happiness includes only intellectual activity, is

oftentimes referred to as an intellectualist or dominant view. Those that embrace the intellectualist view usually appeal to Aristotle's claim that that happiness consists in activity in accordance with the highest virtue, and this virtue is the best part of us. Furthermore, whatever constitutes the best part of us is, in some way, divine. Therefore, happiness consists in contemplation exclusively.

Aristotle makes the following remarks:

But if happiness consists in activity in accordance with virtue, it is reasonable that it should be activity in accordance with the highest virtue; and this will be the virtue of the best part of us. Whether this be the intellect, or whatever else it be that is thought to rule and lead us by nature, and to have cognizance of what is noble and divine, either as being itself also actually divine, or as being relatively the divinest part of us, it is the activity of this part of us in accordance with the virtue proper to it that will constitute perfect happiness; and it has been stated already that this activity is the activity of contemplation.¹⁹

John K. Kearney, in "Happiness and the Unity of the Nicomachean Ethics Reconsidered," offers an intellectualist view, using such an approach in argumentation. It cannot be the case that both, the intellectual activity of contemplation and participating in virtuous activity are both the highest good for humankind. His answer is that the highest good for man must be the former. That is, the highest good for man is the intellectual activity of contemplation. Kearney offers at least two main reasons to support the claim that contemplation must be the highest good for man. First, contemplation is an activity that ". . . is

¹⁹ Ibid., Book X, Chapter 7, p. 613 — 1177a12-18.

analogous to the Pure Actuality which is God.”²⁰ Regarding this first point, Kearney makes two observations. Human happiness, in some way, has the happiness of god as an ideal example. The perfect prototype of happiness is god. Kearney puts the point in the following way: “God *is* happiness itself. He needs nothing outside to specify or complete his happiness. And there can be no doubt that Aristotle’s God is by nature happy because he is by nature *Thought*, indeed, a Pure Act of Thought.”²¹ In addition, happiness consists in participating in god-like activity. According to Kearney’s interpretation, there is an intimate connection between the activity of contemplation pursued by human beings and the metaphysical existence of god as a purely thinking being. He finds evidence for such an interpretation of Aristotle in Book Two of the *De Generatione et Corruptione*, which points out, to use Kearney’s words, “. . . that the physical universe approximates or mimics God by way of a perpetual or eternal coming-to-be.”²²

Of the second main reason in support of the claim that contemplation must be the highest good for man, Kearney references six characteristics of contemplation. First, contemplation is the activity unique to the highest

²⁰ John K. Kearney, “Happiness and the Unity of the Nicomachean Ethics Reconsidered,” *Proceedings and the Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 40 (1966): 143.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 136.

²² *Ibid.*, 137.

intellectual virtue of philosophical wisdom.²³ “Man’s highest faculty is thus reason, and when a man engages in philosophical speculation, he is exercising his highest power about the highest and most intelligible speculable objects.”²⁴ Kearney cites the *Nicomachean Ethics* Book X Chapter 7 as evidence of this.²⁵ Second, engaging in contemplation, rather than hindering, enables an individual to think better. To use Kearney’s words, “. . . contemplation is the *most continuous* of activities.”²⁶ Third, contemplation is the most pleasant activity. Pleasant, here, is to be interpreted as “the *completion* of activity.”²⁷ I take Kearney to mean that pleasure naturally follows from pursuing intellectual activity. Fourth, contemplation is self-sufficient. “Contemplation considered in itself, says Kearney, “does not stand in need of either of the aforementioned goods [external goods and goods of the body].”²⁸ This point seems to be rather significant, since Aristotle says early on in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that the highest good or supreme good must be both final and self-sufficient. “Happiness, therefore, being found to be something final and self-sufficient, is the End at which all actions aim.”²⁹ In other words, the highest good must be in itself worthy of pursuit and makes life desirable and lacking in nothing. This brings

²³ Ibid., 138.

²⁴ Ibid., 138-139.

²⁵ Kearney Cites *NE* X 1177a21-22.

²⁶ Ibid., 139.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., 140.

²⁹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, in The Loeb Classical Library, trans. by H. Rackham, ed. Jeffrey Henderson, Book I Chapter 7, p. 31 — 1097b20-21.

us to the fifth characteristic. Contemplation must be final. That is, “contemplation is *loved as an end in itself*.”³⁰ The last characteristic of contemplation is tied to leisure. “The sixth and final characteristic of contemplation put forth by Aristotle in Book Ten of the *Ethics* is intimately connected with the thesis that leisure and the speculative life . . . are the ends toward which all moral activity in the polis is directed.”³¹ Therefore, given that contemplation is a god-like activity and that contemplation is a supremely leisure activity, Kearney concludes that happiness consists in intellectual activity alone.

Such an objection, that happiness consists in intellectual activity exclusively, I argue, is mistaken; and I address this objection in the second part of Chapter Two. Although intellectual activity is needed for happiness, it is not sufficient, for happiness. In fact, not only does Aristotle point out that the most complete life includes intellectual activity as well as virtuous activity, but also, he says that other goods are necessary for happiness. Friendship, to name another example, is needed for happiness. This brings me to the point of the next chapter.

The main topic of Chapter Three is friendship. In the first part of Chapter Three, I explain how friendship is needed for happiness. Friendships, especially

³⁰ Kearney, 140.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 141.

between virtuous persons, provide opportunities for persons to participate in intellectual discourse, to engage in practical reasoning with others, and to enjoy the company of those who are like-minded and share similar interests. We are able to reason better, both theoretically and practically, by dialoguing with friends than when we are alone. Besides that, human beings are social animals; and friendships, at the very least, partially fulfill that aspect of our nature.

That friendship is needed for happiness might seem problematic to some. On the one hand, Aristotle's account seems objectionably egoistic. In his conception of happiness, Aristotle seems to be suggesting that a person draws attention to oneself exclusively and focuses on what that person needs to be happy. That is, the person is thinking only about the goods she needs for happiness but not about the needs of others; on that basis, some claim that Aristotle's account is objectionably egoistic. On the other hand, another objection that might be raised is that Aristotle's account of happiness seems to value friendship only insofar as another end it might bring. In other words, friendship is pursued for the sake of attaining happiness, but friendship is not pursued or valued for its own sake.

Both of those objections are not problematic for Aristotle's account of friendship, and I discuss this in the second half of Chapter Three. In short, Aristotle's conception is not objectionably egoistic because being virtuous

involves taking into account and respecting the good of others. And, Aristotle's account does value pursuing friendship for friendship's sake. It is possible for a good to be pursued for its own sake and for a good to be pursued for another end. That is, it is possible for friendship to be pursued for sake of friendship and yet have another end – namely happiness.

Happiness does not seem possible without some external goods, and discussion of external goods is the topic of discussion for Chapter Four. In Chapter Four, I identify what some of these external goods are. Without certain external goods, such wealth, happiness is not possible. Another way to put that sort of concern is that without money, we cannot provide basic survival needs for ourselves. And, participating in intellectual activity and virtuous activity while one is lacking proper nourishment is difficult if not impossible. Aristotle names some other goods, in addition to money or wealth, needed for happiness to be possible, including: power, health, good children, and beauty. One point of clarification is that these external goods are not a part of the nature of happiness, but they are necessary for the attainment of happiness.

Taking a slight detour in the discussion, remember that I began this entire discussion by considering the good life in general; one philosopher that I mentioned was Confucius. Confucius shares several important similarities to Aristotle, specifically in identifying the importance of virtue ethics in living the

good life. That is, both Aristotle and Confucius claim that virtuous activity plays a crucial role in developing a person's character. In Chapter Six, I compare Aristotle and Confucius on virtue ethics.

But before making such a comparison, in Chapter Five, I provide some background information on Confucius that is relevant to the present discussion. Confucius places high importance on activity in character development. Certain virtuous activities are needed for living a good life. According to Confucius, these activities include: acting with *ren* or authoritative conduct, conforming to *li* or ritual propriety, living according to the *dao* or the way of the Zhou dynasty, and doing what is *yi* or appropriate. The earlier part of Chapter Five is devoted to discussing each of these activities in greater detail and how they are significant to the good life. Engaging in activity exclusively, nevertheless, is not enough for becoming a good person. People also need requisite education in matters concerning a good life and need to be motivated to do what is good. Details of these two matters of concern are explained in the latter portion of Chapter Five.

In Chapter Six, I compare significant similarities Aristotle and Confucius share regarding virtue ethics and their approaches to the good life. Though Aristotle talks about the highest good and the highest good being happiness and Confucius does not, both philosophers emphasize the importance of virtue ethics in the good life. First, both Aristotle and Confucius define virtue in terms of a

mean between extremes. Second, both philosophers emphasize the importance of activity in learning to be virtuous. However, that is not to say that education is not important, which brings me to the third point of comparison. Third, people must be taught to recognize the virtuous and how an act is virtuous, and education is significant for these purposes. Finally, for both Aristotle and Confucius, laws must be used and enforced to encourage people to be virtuous and to do what is virtuous. Each one of these four points is elaborated in Chapter Six.

In summary, when we talk about a good life, we are not merely talking about the goodness of an isolated act. The sort of character a person has matters significantly in a good life. Activities in which a person engages affects the sort of character a person develops. In Chapter Seven, I conclude that Aristotle provides an excellent answer as to what constitutes a good life. A good life is a life that includes intellectual activity, virtuous activity, and virtuous friendship. But, a good life is not possible without certain external goods — such as friends, wealth, political power, good birth, satisfactory children, and beauty. A closing point worth noting is that both Aristotle and Confucius agree on one crucial element of the good life; virtue is necessary for a good life. A person must build a sort of character that is good or virtuous for the life to be considered good.

Chapter 2 — The Nature of Happiness

The goal of this chapter is to explicate how intellectual activity and virtuous activity are parts of the nature of happiness, according to Aristotle's conception of happiness. To begin with, both of those activities have to do with the *ergon* of human beings or what is characteristic to human beings. When we engage in intellectual activity and virtuous activity, we utilize our reasoning capacity, albeit in different ways. The former is more theoretical, and the latter is more practical.

Preliminary Remarks on the Nature of Happiness

Before jumping head long into the discussion, I want to make some preliminary remarks that will make more sense of the forthcoming discussion on how intellectual activity and virtuous activity are part of the nature of happiness. The preliminary remarks consist of the following: First, I distinguish between that which constitutes the nature of happiness from what is needed for happiness. Second, I explain two criteria of happiness. Finally, I examine various popular conceptions of happiness and Aristotle's response to each.

To begin with, the nature of happiness and what is necessary for happiness need to be distinguished. That which is part of the nature of happiness is an essential quality or characteristic of happiness. In contrast, that

which is necessary for happiness, at least for the purposes of the discussion at hand, is not an essential characteristic of happiness. Rather, that which is necessary for happiness makes happiness possible. For instance, the nature of fire is to burn. But, the presence of oxygen is necessary for a fire. That is, without the presence of oxygen, a fire is not possible. However, saying that oxygen is necessary for fire does not mean that oxygen is a part of the nature of fire. Or, take a look at a different example. Having a mother is necessary for being a bachelor. That is, bachelors need to have a mother to be a bachelor. But, having a mother is not a part of the nature of bachelorhood. Being unmarried and being a male are part of the nature of bachelorhood. Let me turn back to the subject at hand. My aim, in this chapter, is to show how intellectual activity and virtuous activity are a part of the nature of happiness.

Two Criteria for Happiness

Keeping in mind the distinction between the nature of happiness and what is necessary for happiness, let me move on to discussing two criteria of happiness. Two criteria for happiness, according Aristotle, include *teleion* and *autarkeias*. The former is oftentimes translated as final or complete. The latter is translated as self-sufficient.

Aristotle defines the first criterion as being final or complete without any qualification. What final or complete without any qualification means needs some clarification. He distinguishes among various sorts of good: goods that are chosen for the sake of other goods; goods that are pursued for their own sake and for the sake of something else; and, that which is always chosen for its own sake and never for the sake of something else.³² The last sort of good applies to happiness exclusively. Happiness, according to Aristotle, is always chosen for its own sake and never for the sake of something else; we do not pursue other goods for their own sake and never for the sake of something else.

Oftentimes we pursue goods solely for the sake of other goods. For instance, we desire and seek money for other things, such as buying a home, buying a car, or getting new clothes. We even buy homes, cars, and clothes for other reasons. Perhaps we believe those things provide us with security and ultimately pleasure.

Then, there are goods we pursue for their own sake and for the sake of something else. Some of these sorts of goods might include friendship, love, and virtue. We seek friendship, love, and virtue, because each is desired for its own sake. But also, we seek them for a further good, namely happiness.

³² Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book I Chapter 7.

A third type of goods is goods we choose for their own sake and never for the sake of anything else. Goods — such as friendship, love, and virtue — are not final in the way happiness is; they are not good without qualification. Happiness, according to Aristotle, is the only good that is always chosen for its own sake and never for the sake of anything else.

In addition to being final or complete, happiness, according to Aristotle, also is self-sufficient. A good that is self-sufficient is worthy of choosing for its own sake. To use Aristotle's words, "Anyhow, we regard something as self-sufficient when all by itself it makes a life choiceworthy and lacking in nothing; and that is what we think happiness is."³³ Note that by talking about the self-sufficiency of happiness, Aristotle is not thereby claiming that we do not need anyone for happiness. In fact, a person living in complete solitude, such as a hermit, cannot be happy, because we are, by nature, social or political beings.³⁴ Rather, happiness is self-sufficient insofar as it makes life lacking in nothing.

Popular Views of Happiness

Before talking about intellectual activity and virtuous activity, Aristotle's responses to a variety of popular views of what constitutes happiness is worth

³³ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. & ed. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1985), Book I Chapter 7, p. 15 — 1097b14-16.

³⁴ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book I Chapter 7 — 1097b8-11.

discussing. One popular view of happiness, which was discussed in the previous chapter, equates happiness with pleasure. If happiness is merely pleasure, then the goal of the individual is to pursue pleasure. A problem I had mentioned with regard to this sort of view is that the individual faces the hedonistic paradox.

Aristotle draws attention to a different problem. He says that the life of pleasure is like the life of beasts. Philosophers oftentimes point to animals, like pigs, as examples of beasts. I am not certain why pigs get picked on more than other animals. But, the point is that other animals, such as pigs, spend their lives doing what we consider physical pleasures. In the case of pigs – they eat, sleep, and poop. Aristotle rejects a notion of happiness that reduces human beings' lives to being like those animals. We are capable of much more than eating and sleeping. We have a reasoning capacity that allows us to do much more. And, we should make use of that capacity, by using it and developing it.

Another popular view of happiness is honor. Honor, however, is a merit that is bestowed by others. This is the precise problem Aristotle has with happiness being honor. If happiness is honor, then a person's happiness is completely beyond her control; a person's happiness is entirely in the hands of someone else – whoever is bestowing the honor. But, a person's happiness should not be entirely in the hands of other people. Aristotle wants an account

of happiness in which an individual can play an active and main role in achieving her own happiness.

Suppose we amend this definition to say that happiness is the possession of virtue. Aristotle finds this revised definition unacceptable. “For, it seems, someone might possess virtue,” he notes, “but be asleep or inactive throughout his life . . . ”³⁵ According to Aristotle’s understanding, happiness involves activity. Merely possessing virtue does not involve activity at all. Notice that possessing virtue must be distinguished from practicing or exercising virtue. The former does not involve doing anything while the latter does. Aristotle, not much later, reiterates the point that activity, performing virtuous acts in particular, is important. He says, “For a man may possess the disposition without its producing any good result, as for instance when he is asleep, or has ceased to function from some other cause; but virtue in active exercise cannot be inoperative—it will of necessity act, and act well.”³⁶

Let me now turn to a third popular conception of happiness. Many understand happiness as wealth. The problem with defining happiness in terms of wealth or money is that we never value money just for its own sake. We value money for something else. That is, we always value and use money for the sake

³⁵ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. & ed. Terence Irwin, Book I Chapter 5, p. 8 —1095b31-1096a1.

³⁶ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, in The Loeb Classical Library, trans. by H. Rackham, ed. Jeffrey Henderson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), Book I Chapter 8, p. 39 — 1099a1-4.

of something else. Whatever money brings usually also is valued for the sake of yet another good. This is the precise problem Aristotle has with this conception of happiness. Wealth is good only for the sake of something else. On the contrary, happiness is good in itself. Happiness is not good merely because it brings about some other good.

The *Ergon* Argument

With these preliminary remarks in mind, let me now turn to two goods that are a part of the nature of happiness: intellectual activity and virtuous activity. An argument in the *Nicomachean Ethics* crucial to understanding how intellectual activity and virtuous activity are part of the nature of happiness is the *ergon* argument. Aristotle points out that the *ariston*, which is frequently translated as highest good, chief good, or supreme good, is happiness; and furthermore, we further comprehend the highest good through the *ergon* of human beings.³⁷ The *ergon* of human beings, frequently translated as the characteristic activity of human beings, has to do with our reasoning capacity. Aristotle reaches this conclusion by an argument from elimination.

The characteristic activity of human beings cannot be sensation, nutrition, or growth. Nutrition and growth is not unique to human beings; nourishment

³⁷ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book I Chapter 7.

and growth, at the very least, is something plants also experience. Neither is sensation unique to human beings; other animals also experience sensation.

Hence, concludes Aristotle, activity that involves the reasoning faculty of human beings must be the characteristic function of human beings. That is, the activity of reasoning is the *ergon* of human beings.

If then the function of man is the active exercise of the soul's faculties in conformity with rational principle, . . . , and if we acknowledge the function of an individual and of a good individual of the same class (for instance, a harper and a good harper, and so generally with all classes) to be generally the same, the qualification of the latter's superiority in excellence being added to the function in his case (I mean that if the function of a harper is to play the harp, that of a good harper is to play the harp well): if this is so, and if we declare that the function of man is a certain form of life, and define that form of life as the exercise of the soul's faculty and activities in association with rational principle, and say that the function of a good man is to perform these activities well and rightly, and if a function is well performed when it is performed in accordance with its own proper excellence—from these premises it follows that the Good of man is the active exercise of his soul's faculties in conformity with excellence or virtues, in conformity with the best and most perfect among them.³⁸

What makes a person good is her ability to reason well.

³⁸ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, in The Loeb Classical Library, trans. by H. Rackham, ed. Jeffrey Henderson, Book I Chapter 7, p. 33 — 1098a7-18.

An Objection to the Activity of Reasoning being the *Ergon* of Human Beings Considered

An objection that can be raised against Aristotle is that our ability to reason well is not unique to human beings at all. Gods also reason. Not only that, but, gods exercise reasoning better than human beings do. This objection, if correct, not only presents a problem for Aristotle's identification of the human beings' *ergon* with the reasoning capacity of human beings, but also, this objection would be a problem for defining happiness. After all, Aristotle's conception of happiness is intimately tied with the *ergon* of human beings. Happiness is the highest good, and, according to Aristotle, we gain a better understanding of the highest good through the *ergon* of human beings. But is this objection really a problem?

I do not think this is an objection that ends up being problematic for Aristotle. Richard Kraut, in "The Peculiar Function of Human Beings," offers a response which involves distinguishing between absolute peculiarity and relative peculiarity.³⁹ Something that is absolutely peculiar to human beings is unique to human beings and shared by no other beings. In contrast, that which is relatively peculiar to human beings is particular to human beings with respect to certain beings. He explains the difference between the two by introducing

³⁹ Richard Kraut, "The Peculiar Function of Human Beings," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 9 (September 1979): 474.

some examples. One example Kraut cites as being absolutely peculiar to human beings is the ability to learn grammar. His example of relative peculiarity is that being biped is relatively peculiar to human beings with respect to horses and dogs. The role this distinction plays in the *ergon* argument is that Aristotle, according to Kraut's interpretation, uses relative peculiarity to refer to the rational capacity of human beings. In particular, the *ergon* of human beings is relatively peculiar to human beings, insofar as lesser beings are concerned. In comparing human beings with plants and animals – nutrition, growth, and sensation do not qualify as what is unique to human beings, but, rational activity is unique to the former.

Does Kraut's solution work? Kraut's explanation certainly helps us understand how rational activity can still be the characteristic activity of human beings, albeit in a qualified fashion. But, Aristotle himself does not claim that the rational activity of human beings is relatively peculiar. Rather, he says that rational activity is the characteristic function of human beings in an unqualified way. To his credit, Kraut probably realizes that this is the case. But to justify his interpretation, he turns to another place, in *Topics*, where Aristotle does make such a distinction, between absolute peculiarity and relative peculiarity.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Kraut cites *Topics* I 5.

Kraut is headed in the right direction, but we can understand how rational activity is the characteristic function of human beings, I think, without positing such a distinction. He is correct insofar as Aristotle does not seem to have in mind all beings far and wide in this discussion. Rather, in the discussion considering the *ergon* argument, he seems to be referring only to entities and beings in the natural world. After all, he contrasts human beings with plants, horses, oxen, and other animals in the natural world. Nowhere in this particular discussion does Aristotle compare human beings with the gods.

Much later, in a different discussion, Aristotle does want to compare human beings with the gods. He points out that the gods and human beings share something in common; specifically, they both participate in the activity of reasoning. The activity in which human beings participate, he says, that is most like the gods is intellectual activity.⁴¹ That Aristotle is talking only about beings in the natural world in the *ergon* argument is no accident. Thus, we can think of the *ergon* argument as defining the uniqueness of rational activity to human beings insofar as inhabitants of the natural world are concerned. In accordance with the *ergon* of human beings, then, we should strive to exercise our reasoning well.

⁴¹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book X Chapter 8.

Regarding the *ergon* of human beings, Nagel contributes some helpful insight. In “Aristotle on *Eudaimonia*,” he talks about a hierarchy of capacities, for example in the case of a giraffe.

What is the point of being a giraffe? A giraffe leads a certain type of active life, supported by complex metabolic and digestive, and circulatory processes, and ordered in such a way as to permit those processes to proceed efficiently. One thing is clear: its walking and seeing and digesting are not simply three separate activities going on side by side in the same individual, like a doll that wets, cries, and closes its eyes. A giraffe is one organism and its functions are coherently organized. Its proper excellence is not just the conjunction of its component functions, but the optimal functioning of the total system in the giraffe’s *life*.⁴²

Nagel is not claiming that the *ergon* of human beings, in any way, is just like the *ergon* of a giraffe. For one, human beings have a reasoning capacity; giraffes do not.⁴³ Nevertheless, insofar as a hierarchy of capacities is concerned, Nagel makes a couple of helpful observations. First, human beings have different functions or capacities, such as the nutritive or rational. Second, though one capacity might depend on another capacity in one way or another, reason is the highest ranking function. “And although reason helps us get enough to eat and move around, it is not subservient to those lower functions. Occasionally it may have to serve as the janitor or pimp of the passions, but that is not basically what it is *for*.”⁴⁴

⁴² Thomas Nagel, “Aristotle on *Eudaimonia*,” *Phronesis* 19 (1972): 256.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

But, what does utilizing our reasoning ability or capacity mean? Exactly what Aristotle means by this has drawn a bit of controversy. Aristotle, I argue, means a number of activities when he talks about our reasoning ability, including theoretical reasoning and practical reasoning. The closest we get to understanding what Aristotle means by theoretical reasoning is by examining some of what he says about theoretical virtues, which will take place in the next section. We use the latter, practical reasoning, to participate in virtuous activity.

The Activity of Contemplation

Let me begin discussion of theoretical reasoning by elaborating on the importance of theoretical reasoning for Aristotle. Since his focus in the *Nicomachean Ethics* is on practical reasoning and on the practical life, remarks on theoretical reasoning are scant. As I mentioned earlier, theoretical activity is one of two crucial activities that is part of the characteristic activity of human beings. Besides that, Aristotle does explicitly regard theoretical reasoning or contemplation highly. Specifically, he says that *theōrētikē* or contemplation is the most divine part of human beings.⁴⁵ A life that includes contemplation is the

⁴⁵ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, in The Loeb Classical Library, Book X Chapter 6, p. 613 — 1177a14-20.

best sort of life.⁴⁶ And, a life that includes theoretical reasoning is better than a life without any theoretical reasoning, such as a life of mere practical reasoning.

A couple of more observations can be made about theoretical reasoning or the activity of contemplation; contemplation is final and self-sufficient. As to being final, Aristotle claims that contemplation is always desired for its own sake and never for the sake of something else. For he says, "Also the activity of contemplation may be held to be the only activity that is loved for its own sake: it produces no result beyond the actual act of contemplation, whereas from practical pursuits we look to secure some advantage, greater or smaller, beyond the action itself."⁴⁷ Moreover, contemplation is self-sufficient. That is, theoretical reasoning is worthy of choosing for its own sake. To use Aristotle's words, "Also the activity of contemplation will be found to possess the highest degree the quality that is termed self-sufficiency . . ." ⁴⁸

What still needs clarification is what Aristotle means by theoretical reasoning. Again, Aristotle does not offer much in the way of explaining what he means by theoretical reasoning in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, since his emphasis is on practical reasoning and the practical life. To be sure, contemplation is an activity. Intellectual virtues — such as *episteme*, *nous*, and *sophia* — technically speaking, are not activities in themselves. Nonetheless, we can say this: by

⁴⁶ Ibid., Book X Chapter 7, p. 619 — 1178a8-10.

⁴⁷ Ibid., Book X Chapter 7, p. 615 — 1177b2-5.

⁴⁸ Ibid., Book X Chapter 7, p. 613 & 615 — 1177a28-29.

theoretical reasoning or contemplation, Aristotle has in mind intellectual activity concerning mathematics or science. According to Sir David Ross, in *Aristotle*, “The Contemplation of these subjects [metaphysics, mathematics, natural science) is, as we shall see from Book X., in Aristotle’s view the ideal life for man.”⁴⁹ Perhaps *sophia* or theoretical wisdom comes as a result of contemplation or intellectual activity. Aristotle says the following about *sophia*:

Hence it is clear that Wisdom must be the most perfect modes of knowledge. The wise man therefore must not only know the conclusions that follow from his first principles, but also have a true conception of those principles themselves. Hence Wisdom must be a combination of Intelligence and Scientific Knowledge: it must be a consummated knowledge of the most exalted objects.⁵⁰

As Ross aptly points out, *sophia* or wisdom is a combination of *episteme* (or scientific knowledge) and *nous* (intelligence or intuitive reason). The subject of the former is that which is universal and that which is necessary. “Scientific Knowledge is a mode of conception dealing with universals and things that are of necessity; and demonstrated truths and all scientific knowledge (since this involves reasoning) are derived from first principles.”⁵¹ Regarding the latter, Aristotle says the following:

If then the qualities whereby we attain truth, and are never led into falsehood, whether about things invariable or things variable, are Scientific Knowledge, Prudence, Wisdom, and Intelligence, and if

⁴⁹ David Ross, *Aristotle*, Intro. by John L. Ackrill (New York: Routledge, 1995), 223.

⁵⁰ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, in The Loeb Classical Library, Book VI Chapter 7, p. 343 — 1141a16-20.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, Book VI Chapter 6, p. 341 — 1140b31-1141a2.

the quality which enables us to apprehend first principles cannot be any one of the three of these, namely Scientific Knowledge, Prudence, and Wisdom, it remains that first principles must be apprehended by Intelligence.⁵²

So, *nous* or intelligence apprehends first principles. As H. Rackham notes, “*νοῦς* now receives its special sense of a particular virtue of the intellect, viz. that faculty of intuition whereby it correctly apprehends (by process of induction) undemonstrable first principles. It is thus a part of σοφία.”⁵³

Virtuous Activity

As for practical reasoning, Aristotle offers much more insight as to what he means by the activity of practical reasoning in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. One of the most important sorts of activities involving practical reasoning is virtuous activity. Besides intellectual or philosophical activity, virtuous activity also is a part of the nature of happiness. What is significant about the role of virtues in happiness is not merely possessing a virtuous disposition. Rather, what matters once again is action, doing what is virtuous.⁵⁴ Before expounding upon the discussion of virtuous activity, let me back up and provide some general information helpful to understanding the discussion at hand.

⁵² Ibid., Book VI Chapter 6, p. 341 — 1141a2-9.

⁵³ Ibid, pp. 340-341, footnote *f*.

⁵⁴ Ibid., Book I Chapter 8, p. 39, 1099a1-4.

Aristotle divides *aretē* or virtue into two main kinds: intellectual virtues and moral virtues. The former originates and develops with teaching. Some intellectual virtues include wisdom and prudence.⁵⁵ In contrast to intellectual virtues, moral virtues result from habit. Aristotle discusses a variety of moral virtues, ranging from courage to justice.

Without further ado, let us focus our attention on moral virtue in particular, since that is of concern insofar as practical reasoning is concerned. What does Aristotle mean by practical reasoning? By practical reasoning, Aristotle is referring to the use of *phronesis*, which means prudence or practical wisdom. Regarding *phronesis*, Aristotle makes the following comments:

We may arrive at a definition of Prudence by considering who are the persons whom we call prudent. Now it is held to be the mark of a prudent man to be able to deliberate well about what is good and advantageous for himself, not in some one department, for instance what is good for his health or strength, but what is advantageous as a means to the good life in general.⁵⁶

An important observation to make here is that a person of practical wisdom is good at deliberating about matters concerning the good life, in general. Another important point is that Aristotle is concerned with employing practical wisdom in matters of conduct. This is evident from the contrast made between practical wisdom or prudence and science (*episteme*). “[Prudence] is not Science, because

⁵⁵ Ibid., Book VI Chapter 12, p. 365 — 1144a3-5.

⁵⁶ Ibid., Book VI Chapter 5, p. 337 — 1140a24-28.

matters of conduct admit of variation . . .”⁵⁷ He continues by distinguishing practical wisdom from art (*techne*). “[Prudence is] not Art, because doing and making are generically different, since making aims at an end distinct from the act of making, whereas in doing the end cannot be other than the act itself: doing well is in itself the end.”⁵⁸ Aristotle is distinguishing practical wisdom or prudence from skills, such as making. D. S. Hutchinson, in “Ethics,” notes the following: “Some philosophers had argued that practical wisdom was a sort of skill, because it brought about correct conduct. But Aristotle strictly separates conduct from other kinds of product (‘making and acting are different’) and he treats practical wisdom quite separately.”⁵⁹

Phronesis or practical wisdom is one of five intellectual virtues. The other intellectual virtues are: *episteme* (scientific knowledge), *techne* (art or technical skill), *nous* (intelligence or intuitive reason), and *sophia* (theoretical wisdom). Though each of the five intellectual virtues involves excellence in deliberation, what distinguishes *phronesis* from the other intellectual virtues is knowledge of what is good for human beings. That is, “[Aristotle] distinguishes it [practical wisdom] from the knowledge of lower goods (e.g., health, wealth, and strength,

⁵⁷ Ibid., Book VI Chapter 5, p. 337 — 1140b1-2.

⁵⁸ Ibid., Book VI Chapter 5, p. 337 — 1140b2-4.

⁵⁹ D. S. Hutchinson, “Ethics,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 207.

which are good only when they lead to a higher human good); it is an awareness of the highest goods, what is good for men as human beings.”⁶⁰

About what must a person of practical reason deliberate well? From the comments Aristotle makes, in the passage cited earlier, Aristotle claims that a person of practical reason deliberates well about matters concerning a good life. A person needs to exercise *phronesis* or practical reason in order to figure out what the virtuous act to do is in a particular circumstance. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, makes a similar observation. “*Phronesis* is an intellectual virtue; but it is an intellectual virtue without which none of the virtues of character can be exercised.”⁶¹ A person of practical reason deliberates well about matters concerning virtuous activity. Such a person utilizes practical wisdom to determine what the appropriate action is given the circumstances. What counts as a virtue in one situation may not be so in a different situation. About such a topic, MacIntyre makes an excellent point: “And what it is to fall into a vice cannot be adequately specified independently of circumstances: the very same action which would in one situation be liberality could in another be prodigality and in a third meanness.”⁶² Before examining what MacIntyre means by such a

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 154.

⁶² Ibid.

comment, let us take a look at what Aristotle means by liberality, prodigality, and meanness.

Liberality is a virtue concerning money. A liberal person gives the right amount of money to the right person, at the right time, in appropriate circumstances. Aristotle has the following comments to make about a liberal person: "Acts of virtue are noble, and are performed for the sake of their nobility; the liberal man therefore will give for the nobility of giving. And he will give rightly, for he will give to the right people, and the right amount, and at the right time, and fulfil all the other conditions of right living."⁶³ Liberality's extremes are prodigality and meanness.

Prodigality is an extreme dealing with excess. A prodigal person spends too much or takes too little. Although, it is rare, as Aristotle points out, that a prodigal person both spends too much and takes too little. "Now the two forms of Prodigality are very seldom found united in the same person, because it is not easy to give to everyone without receiving from anyone: the giver's means are soon exhausted, if he is a private citizen, and only such persons are considered prodigal."⁶⁴ The likelihood that a prodigal person spends too much and takes too little is highly unlikely, practically speaking.

⁶³ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, in The Loeb Classical Library, Book IV Chapter 1, pp. 191 & 193 — 1120a22-26.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, Book IV Chapter 1, p. 197 — 1121a16-19.

Meanness is the other extreme of liberality. It is a deficiency, in which a deficient person takes too much and falls short in spending. People can exhibit this extreme in various forms. "For as it [meanness] consists in two things, deficiency in giving and excess in getting, it is not found in its entirety in every case, but sometimes the two forms occur separately, some men going too far in getting, while others fall short in giving."⁶⁵ People who fall tremendously short of giving, we think of as being like Scrooge. Then there are persons who try to take whatever they can, whatever the resources.⁶⁶

The point MacIntyre is making, by claiming that we cannot specify what would constitute the correct exercise of liberality in every situation and circumstance, is the following. A virtuous person must have knowledge of the particulars of a given situation to determine what the liberal act to do is. What is designated as liberal in one circumstance — the right amount of money given to the appropriate persons, at the right time — may be prodigal in another circumstance.

To return to the subject at hand, practical deliberation is necessary for virtuous activity. More is needed. The *ergon* of human beings plays a significant role in moral virtue, more precisely, in the practice of moral virtue. That is, people must utilize their reasoning capacity to perform virtuous activity.

⁶⁵ Ibid., Book IV Chapter 1, p. 201 — 1121b18-22.

⁶⁶ Ibid., Book IV, Chapter 1, p. 203 — 1121b32-1122a13.

Aristotle speaks of the matter in the following way: "If therefore this is true of all things, excellence or virtue in a man will be the disposition which renders him a good man and also which will cause him to perform his function well."⁶⁷ People must use practical reasoning to determine what the virtuous act is in a particular situation.

When people first learn to do virtuous acts, their ability to reason on practical matters is not at all developed. They learn to do virtuous acts by repetition. The illustration Aristotle uses in his discussion of how we learn to act virtuously is the way in which we learn the arts. We learn the arts by practicing. For instance, individuals become piano players by playing the piano. Playing once on a piano, however, does not make a person a piano player. The person needs to practice habitually or regularly to play the piano well. "Similarly we become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts."⁶⁸ In general, people become virtuous by doing virtuous acts. They must perform virtuous acts habitually or regularly to be virtuous.

Determining what constitutes a virtuous act, according to Aristotle, is not an exact enterprise; it will not be exactly the same in every situation. Instead, virtue is some sort of mean between extremes, in particular, a mean between excess and deficiency. Extremes do not bode well for people generally speaking.

⁶⁷ Ibid., Book I Chapter 6, p. 91 — 1106a21-24.

⁶⁸ Ibid., Book II Chapter 1, p. 73 — 1103b3-5.

Aristotle mentions bodily strength and health as two examples showing how extremes can be destructive.⁶⁹ Too much exercise or too little exercise each destroys strength. But, a proportionate amount of exercise — taking into account the size and build of the person as well as what the individual is capable of performing — builds strength. Too much or too little food or drink destroys health. But, a certain amount of food and drink — taking into account the mass and weight of a person, the ability of a person to process particular foods, a person's rate of metabolism, etc. — produces, preserves, and enhances health.

Likewise, either extreme, excess or deficiency, destroys virtues. Too much fear and not enough pride or too little fear and too much pride (cowardice and rashness, respectively) destroy courage. Choosing too many pleasant things or choosing too few pleasant things (self-indulgence and insensibility, respectively) destroys temperance.

What is virtue? Virtue is a disposition of the soul. Aristotle determines this to be the case by process of elimination.⁷⁰ The state of the soul is one of three possibilities in kind: an emotion, a capacity, or a disposition. The first includes desire, anger, fear, confidence, envy, joy, friendship, hatred, longing, jealousy, and pity. The second is that in virtue of which we are said to be capable of feeling emotions, for example of becoming angry, being pained, or feeling pity.

⁶⁹ Ibid., Book II Chapter 2, p. 77 — 1104a13-21.

⁷⁰ Ibid., Book II Chapter 5, p. 87 & 89 — 1105a22-1106a13.

The third, states of character, is that in virtue of which we stand well or badly with reference to emotions. For example, in terms of anger, we stand badly if we feel it too violently or too weakly. But, we stand well if we feel anger moderately.

Of what kind is virtue? Virtue is not an emotion, since we are not called good or bad on grounds of our emotions. Neither is virtue a capacity, because we feel anger and fear without a choice. In contrast, virtues are modes of choice; virtues involve making choices. So, virtue, according to Aristotle, is a state of character, in which we have a disposition to choose the mean. In particular, moral virtue is a state of character, in virtue of which we stand well or badly with reference to emotions.

Not only is moral virtue a state of character, but also, Aristotle points out that moral virtue is a state of character in which we use our reasoning faculty to deliberate and determine what choice to make in any given situation. He says, "Virtue then is a settled disposition of the mind determining the choice of actions and emotions, consisting essentially in the observance of the mean relative to us, this being determined by principle, that is, as the prudent man would determine it."⁷¹ Let us put together what has been said about virtue thus far. Virtue is a state of character that decides; virtue consists of a mean. And, virtuous persons

⁷¹ Ibid., Book II Chapter 6, p. 95 — 1106b36-1107a2.

use the *ergon* of human beings or reasoning capacity, practical reasoning in this case, to deliberate and to make a choice that is a mean between extremes.

An Objection Against my Interpretation of the Nature of Happiness Considered

An objection might be raised against my interpretation of the nature of happiness. I argue that the nature of happiness includes intellectual activity and virtuous activity, as well as friendships (which will be discussed in the next chapter). Some philosophers claim that the nature of happiness is such that it includes intellectual activity exclusively. In what follows, I explain the objection in further detail and explain how such an objection is misguided and does not threaten my interpretation.

Recall that according to Aristotle happiness is the highest good. That happiness is the highest good, I believe, is the main leverage used in this objection. Those who argue in favor of defining happiness as intellectual activity exclusively use the point that happiness is the highest good in two ways. First, the highest good is intellectual activity and as a result it is the only good that qualifies for the nature of happiness. Second, intellectual activity is the highest good insofar as it is the only good that connects human beings with gods in any

way. Let us look at each of these two points in further detail, before I respond to this objection.

With regard to the first point, the reasoning goes something like this. Happiness is the highest good. Only goods that are the highest constitute the nature of happiness. All other goods perhaps are necessary for happiness (but not a part of the nature of happiness), or they play no significant role insofar as happiness is concerned. Ronna Burger, in “Wisdom, Philosophy, and Happiness,” argues that happiness is defined in terms of intellectual activity exclusively. Book X of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, according to Burger, specifies the sort of life that represents happiness. Aristotle identifies complete or perfect happiness with the activity of contemplation. “At this moment [nearly at the end of the last book], however, Aristotle simply professes to have already furnished it [the human good]: complete or perfect happiness, he declares, was said before to be θεωρητική [*theoretika*], the activity of contemplation (1177a18).”⁷² The part of the human being that Aristotle identifies with the human good is the mind or the intellect. Although Aristotle, admits Burger, is quite hesitant in making such an identification.

Yet Aristotle is extraordinarily hesitant, even here [in Book X], about identifying what this best part of us is: whether or not this is mind or intellect (νοῦς) [*nous*], or whatever is thought to rule and

⁷² Ronna Burger, “Wisdom, Philosophy, and Happiness: On Book X of Aristotle’s Ethics,” *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy* 6 (1990): 295.

lead in accordance with nature and to have awareness of beautiful and divine things, whether it is in itself divine or the most divine thing in us, its activity would be complete or perfect happiness.⁷³

Aristotle's idea of *nous* is based on *sophia* or theoretical wisdom. "Aristotle's wishful appeal to νοῦς [*nous*] is motivated by the common opinion to which he appeals, that there really is such a thing as σοφία [*sophia*] or theoretical wisdom in general."⁷⁴

That the nature of happiness includes only the highest or best good seems quite plausible. In fact, Aristotle makes an explicit comment about an intellectual life being the happiest. ". . . the life of the intellect is the best and the pleasantest life for man, inasmuch as the intellect more than anything else is man; therefore this life will be the happiest."⁷⁵ And then, he proceeds to contrast the intellectual life and the virtuous life by pointing out that the intellectual life is happier than the moral life. "The life of moral virtue, on the other hand, is happy only in a secondary degree. For the moral activities are purely human . . ."⁷⁶ Both of these comments seem to support the claim that intellectual activity constitutes the nature of happiness.

In fact, some maintain that those two comments made by Aristotle supports the claim that intellectual activity alone constitutes the nature of

⁷³ Ibid., 296.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 297.

⁷⁵ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, in The Loeb Classical Library, Book X Chapter 7, p. 619 — 1178a7-9.

⁷⁶ Ibid., Book X Chapter 7, p. 619 — 1178a10-12.

happiness. For instance, John K. Kearney, after making reference to the two different kinds of happiness, one involving intellectual activity and one involving virtuous activity, insists that it cannot be the case that intellectual activity and virtuous activity both are the highest good for humankind. Intellectual contemplation alone is the highest good. Contemplation is the activity unique to the highest intellectual virtue of philosophical wisdom. To use his words, "Man's highest faculty is thus reason, and when a man engages in philosophical speculation, he is exercising his highest power about the highest and most intelligible speculable objects."⁷⁷ Intellectual activity being the highest good or activity is one key reason he argues that intellectual activity alone constitutes the nature of happiness.

With regard to being the highest good, some also draw attention to the fact that intellectual activity is the only good that is final and self-sufficient. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, Aristotle explicitly claims that the activity of contemplation is final. That is, intellectual activity always is desired for its own sake and never for the sake of something else. In addition, intellectual activity is self-sufficient. That is, it is worth choosing for its own sake. In virtue of being the highest good, intellectual activity or contemplation alone constitutes the nature of happiness.

⁷⁷ John K. Kearney, "Happiness and the Unity of the *Nicomachean Ethics* Reconsidered," *Proceedings and the Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 40 (1966): 138-139.

The second point oftentimes used to show how intellectual activity and intellectual activity alone constitutes the nature of happiness is that the activity of intellectual contemplation counts as the highest good insofar as it is the only good human beings share with gods. Gods engage in intellectual activity perfectly. More precisely, gods embody pure intellect. On the contrary, human beings are not pure intellect. People are not only capable of engaging in intellectual activity, but also, they are able to perform activities that utilize what Aristotle calls the non-rational part of the soul; we can participate in virtuous acts. Nonetheless, human beings have a chance to participate in the divine by engaging in contemplative activity. For this reason, Aristotle says that the activity of *theōrētikē* or contemplation is the greatest source of happiness. He says, "It follows that the activity of God, which is transcendent in blessedness, is the activity of contemplation; and therefore among human activities that which is most akin to the divine activity of contemplation will be the greatest source of happiness."⁷⁸

Let me begin my response by affirming some important points made. Certainly, Aristotle views intellectual activity as the highest good in several ways. Intellectual activity is a higher good than virtuous activity. Intellectual activity is both final and self-sufficient. Moreover, when we engage in

⁷⁸ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, in The Loeb Classical Library, Book X Chapters 7 and 8, p. 623 — 1178b20-26.

intellectual activity, according to Aristotle, we are most like the gods. I grant all these points. But, those points are not enough to demonstrate that the nature of happiness consists in intellectual activity alone. Even granting these points, it is possible that other goods are also a part of the nature of happiness. In fact, I argue that not only is it possible that other goods are needed for happiness; but also, certain goods, virtuous activity and friendships specifically, are a part of the nature of happiness. In what follows, I will present evidence showing how, according to Aristotle, virtuous activity is a part of the nature of happiness.

A noteworthy point is that Aristotle maintains that certain beings do not qualify as happy, if they do not participate in virtuous activity.

We have good reasons therefore for not speaking of an ox or horse or any other animal as being happy, because none of these is able to participate in noble activities. For this cause also children cannot be happy, for they are not old enough to be capable of noble acts; when children are spoken of as happy, it is in compliment to their promise for the future.⁷⁹

Animals, on Aristotle's understanding, are not capable of happiness. Unlike animals, children do possess the capacity for happiness. Nonetheless, they are not able to perform virtuous acts and hence do not qualify as happy. That children cannot be happy seems *prima facie* problematic. A further reason animals cannot be happy is that they are incapable of participating in intellectual activity. "A further confirmation," claims Aristotle, "is that the lower animals

⁷⁹ Ibid., Book I Chapter 9, p. 47 — 1100a1-7.

cannot partake of happiness (*eudaimonia*), because they are completely devoid of the contemplative activity.”⁸⁰

That children cannot be happy is only problematic without accurately comprehending Aristotle’s conception of happiness. For instance, in the situation where we temporarily forget what Aristotle means by happiness and believe that happiness is pleasure, then we would understandably object to the claim that children cannot be happy. If the nature of happiness consists in pleasure, then children can be happy. That, nonetheless, is not an accurate understanding of Aristotle’s conception of happiness.

Recall that happiness, according to Aristotle, is intimately tied to the characteristic function of human beings. Specifically, the nature of happiness is defined by the reasoning capacity of human beings. Children, especially younger ones, have not developed a reasoning capacity to any great extent. As a result, they are unable to participate in intellectual activity or in virtuous activity. So, it is perfectly understandable for Aristotle to point out that children cannot be happy.

What needs to be clarified is that Aristotle is not assuming that all children or people generally speaking, regardless of age or development, are on the same level, in terms of reasoning ability. He recognizes that people exhibit different

⁸⁰ Ibid., Book X Chapter 8, p. 623 — 1178b24-26.

levels of moral development. M. F. Burnyeat, in "Aristotle on Learning to be Good,"⁸¹ does an excellent job explaining the different levels of moral development. The moral development of people can be broken down into at least three main stages. As Burnyeat points out, Aristotle recognizes three groups of individuals, without assigning a particular name to each group. The lowest group includes individuals that do not respond to reason. This group includes, at the very least, young children. The middle group responds to reason but is sometimes distracted by pleasure (or pain). The highest group is guided by reason exclusively.

The bottom or least mature level of moral development can be described as follows. The lowest group includes individuals who do not respond to reason. This group includes, at the very least, young children. People in this group are taught to habituate virtues using pain and pleasure because they know neither what virtue is nor how the virtuous in fact is virtuous. They are provided with rewards or pleasure for doing what is virtuous. They are given punishments or pain for doing what is vicious. Educating persons at this stage can be difficult because everyone desires pleasure, and some pleasures are not as noble as others. At this stage, these people know neither what is virtuous nor

⁸¹ M. F. Burnyeat, "Aristotle on Learning to be Good," In *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*, ed. by Amélie Oksenberg Rorty (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980): 69-92.

why something is virtuous; to use Burnyeat's terminology, they have no sense of the 'that' or the 'because' respectively.

The middle group is more morally developed. People in this group do respond to reason. By this time or stage, people have developed good habits by taking to heart, through repetition, what is virtuous. They are guided and motivated by a sense of honor and shame. Unlike the previous group, these people are not habituated by fear; they are guided by a sense of honor and shame. The difficulty in educating persons in this group, however, is that they still have a tendency to give in to pleasure. Unlike the lowest group, persons in the middle group do have a sense of 'that.' That is, they know what counts as virtuous. But, people in this group still do not have a sense of the 'because'; they do not know why something is virtuous.

The highest group is the most mature persons in moral development. These persons are guided completely by reason. Not only do they have a sense of 'that,' but also, they know the 'because.' That is, they know what is virtuous and why something is virtuous. Moreover, individuals in this group love that which is virtuous and they take pleasure in doing that which is virtuous.

A further insight that can be drawn from recognizing the fact that different persons are at varying stages of moral development is that we can see how Aristotle can account for *akrasia*. A person who exhibits *akrasia* is a person

that possesses a weakness of will. In other words, a person with a weakness of will might know what is virtuous but not be motivated to do what is virtuous.

The way we make sense of this is by understanding that a person who possesses a weakness of will simply has not reached the highest level of moral maturity in which the person is guided by reason alone. Rather, a person experiencing *akrasia* might be in the middle group. The person might know what is virtuous but not do what is virtuous because she is tempted by pleasure.

To return to the discussion at hand, all this is to say that claiming that children are not happy does not seem so problematic, once we recall what Aristotle means by happiness. Happiness is defined by the characteristic activity of human beings. What has been explicated up to this point is that intellectual activity and virtuous activity are a part of the nature of happiness. Given the fact that children are not morally developed (they are not a part of the middle or highest group) and do not perform virtuous acts regularly, they fail to fulfill what is needed for happiness.

So far in my response, I have shown how virtuous activity is needed or necessary for happiness. But, I have not yet explained how virtuous activity is a part of the nature of happiness. This is what I endeavor to show next.

How Virtuous Activity is a Part of the Nature of Happiness

To demonstrate how virtuous activity is a part of the nature of happiness, I draw attention to two main points. First, virtuous activity is a good of the soul, and happiness is defined by goods of the soul. Second, in his discussion of various popular views of happiness, Aristotle makes apparent his understanding that virtuous activity is part of the nature of happiness.

Goods, as Aristotle points out, fall into three main kinds or classes: external goods, goods of the body, and goods of the soul.⁸² As for external goods, he has in mind goods such as wealth, honor, good children, good birth, political power, or friends.⁸³ The sort of goods that count as goods of the body includes health, physical strength or well-being, and beauty.⁸⁴ What Aristotle means by goods of the soul, at the very least, includes intellectual activity, virtuous activity, and friendship (especially friendship among virtuous persons).⁸⁵ Goods of the soul are the highest of the three kinds of goods. To use his words, “. . . of these three kinds of goods, those of the soul we commonly pronounce good in the fullest sense and the highest degree.”⁸⁶ Furthermore, in connection with the general discussion at hand, goods of the soul constitute the

⁸² Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* Book I Chapter 8.

⁸³ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* Book I Chapter 8; Aristotle, *Metaphysics* – “Magna Moralia” Book I Chapter 3.

⁸⁴ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* – “Magna Moralia” Book I Chapter 3.

⁸⁵ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*; Aristotle, *Metaphysics* – “Magna Moralia” Book I Chapter 3.

⁸⁶ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, in The Loeb Classical Library, Book I Chapter 8, p. 37 — 1098b16-18.

nature of happiness. For he continues by saying, “But it is our actions and the soul’s active exercise of these functions that we posit (as being Happiness); hence so far as this opinion goes—and it is of long standing, and generally accepted by students of philosophy—it supports the correctness of our definition of Happiness.”⁸⁷ So, given what Aristotle says about the nature of happiness and what constitutes it, not only intellectual happiness, but also, virtuous activity and friendship are part of the nature of happiness. Both are goods of the soul. As a result, they are good in the fullest sense and the highest degree. More will be said of friendship in the next chapter.

A second indication that virtuous activity is a part of the nature of happiness comes from Aristotle’s consideration of popular views of happiness. Recall that at one point in time, he examines a popular conception of happiness as virtue. In his response to identifying happiness as virtue, he says that insofar as the activity of virtue includes virtuous, he is in agreement. “Now with those who pronounce happiness to be virtue, or some particular virtue, our definition is in agreement, for ‘activity in conformity with virtue’ involves virtue.”⁸⁸ His only qualm is that happiness is more than merely possessing virtue; activity is ever important. A person, to be happy, must at least do virtuous acts, often and consistently. Aristotle is in agreement that virtue plays an important role in

⁸⁷ Ibid., Book I Chapter 7, p. 37 — 1098b18-20.

⁸⁸ Ibid., Book I Chapter 7, p. 39 — 1098b30-32.

happiness, namely, virtuous activity is part of the nature of happiness. Hence, those two references together give strong indication that he not only means to claim that virtuous activity is needed for happiness, but, virtuous activity is part of the nature of happiness.

A further objection might be raised against my response. Even granting the points I have made, Aristotle views intellectual activity as a higher good than virtuous activity. In fact, he says that the life of the intellect is higher than the life of virtue. Recall what he says about the two:

. . . accordingly the life of the intellect is the best and the pleasantest life for man, inasmuch as the intellect more than anything else is man; therefore this life will be the happiest.

The life of moral virtue, on the other hand, is happy only in a secondary degree. For moral activities are purely human . . .⁸⁹

Surely this is an indication that happiness consists only in intellectual activity, given that the life of the intellect is higher than the life of virtue.

A deeper examination of that passage and of what Aristotle says in general in the *Nicomachean Ethics* will show that that is not problematic to my interpretation. First, the point of that passage is: when each good (intellectual activity and virtuous activity) is considered in isolation, the former ranks higher than the latter. A different way to put the matter is that a life with intellectual activity is better than a life without it, since intellectual activity is the highest

⁸⁹ Ibid., Book X Chapter 7-8, p. 619 — 1178a7-13.

good. A life with virtuous activity is better than a life without it. But, in comparing the two, a life without intellectual activity is worse than a life without virtuous activity. So, the passage cited above is not to be understood as a life of intellectual activity exclusively, a life in which a person does nothing else besides participate in intellectual activity. Similarly, when Aristotle speaks of the life of virtuous activity, that sort of life is not to be understood as a life consisting of nothing else besides virtuous activity. Reading the passage as speaking of a life consisting of nothing else besides intellectual activity or a life consisting of nothing else besides virtuous activity would make much of what Aristotle says puzzling.

As explained earlier, according to Aristotle, many goods are necessary for happiness. These goods are necessary in different ways. For starters, the nature of happiness concerns excellences of the soul. Aristotle notes the following: "But inasmuch as happiness is a certain activity of soul in conformity with perfect goodness, it is necessary to examine the nature of goodness. For this will probably assist us in our investigation of the nature of happiness."⁹⁰ The nature of happiness includes activities of the soul, not activities of the body (or external goods for that matter). As Aristotle puts it, "But human goodness means our view of excellence of soul, not excellence of body; also our definition of

⁹⁰ Ibid., Book I Chapter 8, p. 61 — 1102a5-8.

happiness is an activity of the soul.”⁹¹ Activities of the soul are, to name a couple, intellectual activity and virtuous activity. Those activities, however, are not enough for happiness. Other goods not a part of the nature of happiness are needed to make happiness possible. Such goods include external goods. “Nevertheless it is manifest that,” says Aristotle, “happiness also requires external goods in addition, as we said; for it is impossible, or at least not easy to play a noble part unless furnished with the necessary equipment.”⁹² The point is that more than one good is needed for happiness. So, when Aristotle says that the life of intellectual activity is the best or that the life of intellectual activity is happiest, he surely does not mean that happiness is achieved when a person pursues only intellectual activity her entire life.

In addition to what has been said thus far, Aristotle discloses that his understanding of happiness is consistent with popular or ordinary views of happiness. Regarding the definition of happiness or the nature of happiness, he says the following: “Accordingly we must examine our first principle not only as a logical conclusion deduced from certain premises but also in the light of current opinions on the subject. For if a proposition be true, all the facts harmonize with it, but if it is false, it is soon found to be discordant with them.”⁹³ That happiness concerns goods or activities of the soul are generally agreed upon

⁹¹ Ibid., Book I Chapter 8, p. 61 — 1102a16-18.

⁹² Ibid., Book I Chapter 8, p. 43 — 1099a31-1099b1.

⁹³ Ibid., Book I Chapter 8, p. 37 — 1098b9-13.

as true.⁹⁴ Moreover, that happiness, in part, consists in virtuous activity also is consistent with popular or ordinary views of happiness.⁹⁵ An understanding of happiness consisting of intellectual activity exclusively would not be consistent with popular or ordinary views of happiness. That is, a view excluding virtuous activity as a part of the nature of happiness would be inconsistent with ordinary conceptions of happiness.

The goal of this chapter has been to show that the nature of happiness includes at least two activities: intellectual activity and virtuous activity. In the next chapter, I explicate how a third good, friendship, also is part of the nature of happiness. Not just any friendship is a part of the nature of happiness. Aristotle believes that friendships among virtuous persons, in particular, are part of the nature of happiness, and this is what I endeavor to show in the next chapter.

⁹⁴ Ibid., Book I Chapter 8, p. 37 — 1098b13-18.

⁹⁵ Ibid., Book I Chapter 8, p. 39 — 1098b22-1099a4.

Chapter 3 — Friendship & the Nature of Happiness

What constitutes a friendship? Looking at life experiences alone, I was under the impression that friendship is something shared by persons with similar interests. More than that, two persons sharing a friendship are interested in the well-being of each other, mutually enjoy spending time together, and share common interests in many areas. Oftentimes these two persons share common interests in at least several areas that are significant to the individuals' lives. Under normal considerations, neighbors, officemates, or colleagues are not considered friends unless relationships are deliberately formed and the characteristics just mentioned are met. Neither have I thought of people who used my talents or knowledge merely for their benefit exclusively as friends. Keeping this in mind, I was surprised to find that Aristotle calls relationships that arise solely out of utility, friendships, or at least one type of friendship.

Friendship, according to Webster's Dictionary, means "the state of being friends."⁹⁶ And a *friend* simply means "one attached to another by affection or esteem." A slight variation of the definition of the term is "acquaintance." Given this denotation of friendship, I better understand Aristotle's approach to friendship. That is not to say that Aristotle values all types of friendship in the same way. In fact, he views only one type of friendship as worthy of being part

⁹⁶ Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary, 9th edition, s.v. friendship.

of the nature of happiness. The other types of friendship are needed for happiness, but they are not part of the nature of happiness.

The goal of this chapter is to show how one type of friendship in particular, virtuous friendship, is part of the nature of happiness. I admit from the start that this is a controversial claim. Upon closer examination of what Aristotle says in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, however, such a claim not only no longer seems so controversial but also makes sense. Before explaining how virtuous friendship constitutes the nature of happiness, several preliminary remarks need to be made.

I begin by making a couple of preliminary remarks about friendship. First, I explain what Aristotle means by the term, friendship. Second, I detail three of the main types of friendship that are discussed in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. After this discussion, I explicate how virtuous friendship in particular is part of the nature of happiness. Discussion of the role the other two types of friendship plays in happiness is provided in the next chapter.

Qualities of Friendship

Aristotle offers the following definition of friendship: “To be friends therefore, men must (1) feel goodwill for each other, that is, wish each other’s good, and (2) be aware of each other’s goodwill, and (3) the cause of their

goodwill must be one of the loveable qualities mentioned above."⁹⁷ Exactly how each of these qualities plays out varies according to the kind of friendship being considered.

Let us take a look at the first quality. In a utility friendship, for instance, the good will the parties feel towards one another has to do with wishing what is useful for the other party. In the case of a pleasure friendship, each wishes what is pleasant for the other. With a virtuous friendship, each individual wishes the other to continue being virtuous and doing virtuous acts. This quality alone does not constitute a friendship of any type.

Another quality is needed to rule out certain possibilities from counting as friendships, such as strangers who feel good will towards someone else but the feeling is not reciprocated. Circumstances in which one person wishes another person well for her sake but the feeling is not reciprocated count as having good will towards another, says Aristotle, but do not constitute a friendship. He also wants to rule out desires for inanimate objects, such as wishing that a bottle of wine keeps well for drinking purposes, as contenders for friendship.⁹⁸ Thus, in a friendship, not only must two people feel good will for each other, but also, they must be aware of each other's good will. Like the first quality, exactly how this quality plays out depends on the kind of friendship. For example, in a utility

⁹⁷ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, in The Loeb Classical Library, trans. by H. Rackham, ed. Jeffrey Henderson (Cambridge: MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), Book VIII Chapter 2, p. 457 — 1156a1-5.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, Book VIII Chapter 2, p. 457 — 1155b32-34.

friendship, one person is aware that the other wishes what is useful for her, and vice versa. Likewise, in a pleasure friendship, one person is aware that the other wishes what is pleasant for her, and vice versa. In a virtuous friendship, one person is aware that the other wishes what is good or virtuous for the other, and vice versa.

Still, without a third quality, we still do not have a friendship, according to Aristotle. For a relationship to be a friendship, the cause of the good will of each person must be one of the loveable qualities mentioned: utility, pleasure, or virtue, depending on the type of friendship. In a utility friendship, the cause of the good will of each person must be utility. In a pleasure friendship, the cause of the good will of each person must be pleasant. In a virtuous friendship, the cause of the good will of each person must be good or virtuous.

Three Main Types of Friendship

Let us now turn our attention to three main types of friendship: utility friendship, pleasure friendship, and virtuous friendship. Utility friendship is the lowest form of friendship. After all, Aristotle does say that “. . . friendship of utility is a thing for sordid souls.”⁹⁹ Utility friendship only lasts as long as the other person is useful. For instance, suppose a utility friendship between a

⁹⁹ Ibid., Book VIII Chapter 6, p. 475 — 1158a21-22.

teacher and a student. The teacher desires money in exchange for teaching the student certain material. The student desires to learn certain material from the teacher in exchange for money. The teacher desires that the student learn certain material, and likewise, the student desires the teacher get money for the services rendered. Each is aware of the other's good will. And the cause of the good will for the teacher and the student is utility, whether money or material learned. Once the services have been rendered, however, the friendship between the teacher and the student ends, especially if the friendship was strictly a utility friendship.

A few general comments regarding utility friendships are as follows.

First, utility friendships usually do not last all that long. A utility friendship lasts only as long as both persons in the friendship still benefit from the other person.

Second, persons that share a utility friendship usually do not spend much time together, since they do not have much in common, beyond a certain utility.

Aristotle puts the matter in the following way: "Friends of this kind do not indeed frequent each other's company much, for in some cases they are not even pleasing to each other, and therefore have no use for friendly intercourse unless they are mutually profitable; since their pleasure in each other goes no further than their expectations of advantage."¹⁰⁰ Third, persons in a utility friendship

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., Book VIII Chapter 3, pp. 459 & 461 — 1156a28-31.

oftentimes quarrel. Persons in a utility friendship quarrel because each party frequently desires more or expects more than what she is getting. Or, to use Aristotle's words, "For here the friends associate with each other for profit, and so each always wants more, and thinks he is getting less than his due; and they make it a grievance that they do not get as much as they want and deserve; and the one who is doing a service can never supply all that the one receiving it wants."¹⁰¹ Fourth, a person can form many utility friendships, since others can be of varying uses.¹⁰²

Let us move on the second type of friendship. Although still an inferior type of friendship, pleasure friendship is a bit better than utility friendship. At the very least, in a pleasure friendship, one person enjoys the company of the other person, and vice versa.¹⁰³ The sort of pleasure that motivates persons to pursue a pleasure friendship varies, ranging from taking pleasure from receiving attention from a lover to enjoying the character of another.

A few other general remarks regarding pleasure friendships are as follows. First, like utility friendships, pleasure friendships usually are not long lasting. However, the duration of a pleasure friendship usually is longer than a utility friendship. Lovers are a good example of persons engaging in a pleasure

¹⁰¹ Ibid., Book VIII Chapter 13, pp. 505 & 507 — 1162b16-21.

¹⁰² Ibid., Book VIII Chapter 6, p. 473 — 1158a17-19.

¹⁰³ Ibid., Book VIII Chapter 6, pp. 473 & 475 — 1158a18-22.

friendship. The pleasure each lover experiences, notes Aristotle, is somewhat different.

These do not find their pleasure in the same things: the lover's pleasure is in gazing in his beloved, the loved one's pleasure is in receiving the attentions of the lover; and when the loved one's beauty fades, the friendship sometimes fades too, as the lover no longer finds pleasure in the sight of his beloved, and the loved one no longer receives the attentions of the lover. . .¹⁰⁴

The more general point of this passage is simply that in a romantic (or non-Platonic) relationship, each person experiences different sorts of pleasure from the other. With regard to pleasure friendship broadly speaking, the pleasure each party feels is different in kind and intensity.

A second general remark regarding pleasure friendships is that, like utility friendships, pleasure friendships frequently last only as long as both enjoy the relationship. Such friendships are quite common among young persons. Insofar as pleasure friendships between young persons are concerned, Aristotle makes the following comment: "And the things that please them change as their age alters; hence they both form friendships and drop them quickly, since their affections alter with what gives them pleasure, and the tastes of the youth change quickly."¹⁰⁵ Such a comment seems on the mark. Children most frequently form friendships with persons who share similar interests. Younger children might

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., Book VIII Chapter 4, p. 465 — 1157a7-10.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., Book VIII Chapter 3, p. 461 — 1156a33-35.

share hobbies and common interests, such as trading stickers or playing with transformers, with others close to their age. But, interests change as children age. Older children perhaps take interest in video games, various sports, or different academic activities.

A third general remark about pleasure friendships is that, in contrast to utility friendships, persons sharing a pleasure friendship tend to spend more time together. Unlike persons in a utility friendship, persons in a pleasure friendship actually enjoy spending time together. The more interests the two share in common, the more time they tend to share together.

A fourth remark regarding pleasure friendships is that a person can have multiple pleasure friendships. Similar to utility friendships in which it is possible to like different persons for their uses or utility, likewise, persons can like others for being pleasant in varying ways. To use Aristotle's words, "But it is possible to like a number of persons for their utility and pleasantness, for useful and pleasant people are plentiful, and the benefits they confer can be enjoyed at once."¹⁰⁶

Though utility friendships and pleasure friendships are different in significant ways, utility friendships and pleasure friendships are similar in an important way. Both are inferior types of friendship, according to Aristotle. The

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., Book VIII Chapter 6, p. 473 — 1158a17-19.

main reason they are considered inferior is that in such friendships, one person does not love the other for who they are, and vice versa. Rather, one person loves the other only for some use or pleasure. From this, Aristotle concludes, "And therefore these friendships are based on an accident, since the friend is not loved for being what he is, but as affording some benefit or pleasure as the case may be."¹⁰⁷ Since nothing more binds utility friendships and pleasure friendships together, except utility and pleasure respectively, they are not long lasting friendships. These sorts of friendships come and go as easily as the use and the pleasure comes and goes.

So far in the discussion on the kinds of friendship, I have talked about utility friendships and pleasure friendships separately. In doing so, I am not thereby claiming that utility friendships and pleasure friendships are exclusive. In fact, utility and pleasure can coexist in a friendship. Aristotle names the friendship between a husband and wife as just such an example.¹⁰⁸ A wife provides certain utility and pleasure to her husband and the husband provides different utility and pleasure to his wife. The particular kind and amount of utility and pleasure one receives from the other varies.

Without further ado, let us now move to discussion of the third type of friendship, the focus of this chapter — virtuous friendship. Virtuous friendship

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., Book VIII Chapter 3, p. 459 — 1156a18-20.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., Book VIII Chapter 12, p. 503 — 1162a16-29.

is the truest or most perfect form of friendship.¹⁰⁹ A virtuous friendship can only take place between two good or virtuous persons. This can be seen in stark contrast with the other two types of friendship discussed earlier. In utility friendships and pleasure friendships, at best, one of the two persons is good. Aristotle states the following: "Friendships therefore based on pleasure and on utility can exist between two bad men, between one bad man and one good, and between a man neither good nor bad and another either good, bad, or neither."¹¹⁰ But, in a friendship based on virtue, one person wishes the good of the other for her sake and vice versa.

Let us examine some general observations about virtuous friendships. One of the main defining features of a virtuous friendship is that each person in the relationship is good or virtuous. What motivates a good person to form a virtuous friendship with another involves loving what is good and desiring goodness for the other person. To use Aristotle's words, ". . . good men will be friends for each other's sake, since they are alike in being good."¹¹¹ From the fact that both persons in a virtuous friendship are virtuous, several points follow.

First, virtuous friendships are longer lasting. Two people in a virtuous friendship love each other not merely for being useful or pleasant. Rather, two persons love each other for each other's goodness and virtue. Since virtue, for

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., Book VIII Chapter 5, p. 471 — 1157b25-26.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., Book VIII Chapter 4, p. 467 — 1157a16-20.

¹¹¹ Ibid., Book VIII Chapter 4, p. 469 — 1157b3-5.

Aristotle, is not a fleeting quality but a lasting quality; likely, a virtuous friendship also is lasting. He says, "Hence the friendship of these lasts as long as they continue to be good; and virtue is a permanent quality."¹¹²

Second, two persons sharing a virtuous friendship tend to spend a significant amount of time together. Two people become acquainted by spending time together. The more time they spend together, the better they know each other. Aristotle puts the matter this way: ". . . [Virtuous friendships] require time and intimacy: as the saying goes, you cannot get to know a man till you have consumed the proverbial amount of salt in his company; and so you cannot admit him to friendship or really be friends, before each has shown the other that he is worthy of friendship and has won his confidence."¹¹³ Not only do persons engaging in a virtuous friendship spend time together, sitting or standing side by side. Rather, they get to know each other's tastes, preferences, and positions on various matters. Given enough time to spend together, the two participate in rational discourse, discussing practical matters as well as philosophical or intellectual matters.

Third, insofar as virtuous friendships are of concern, persons in these friendships do not really quarrel about not receiving enough from the other or not sufficiently benefiting from the other. Instead, each desires to do that which

¹¹² Ibid., Book VIII Chapter 3, p. 461 — 1156b12-14.

¹¹³ Ibid., Book VIII Chapter 3, p. 463 — 1156b26-28.

is good for the other. Such is characteristic of virtuous friendship, claims Aristotle.¹¹⁴

Virtuous friendships are neither common nor abundant. On the contrary, they are few in number.¹¹⁵ As seen from the discussion on virtuous friendships thus far, such friendships require much time and effort to develop. Thus, true friendships of this sort are never easily acquired.

How Virtuous Friendship is Part of the Nature of Happiness

Now we have taken a look at what virtuous friendship is and how it is different from two other main types of friendship. What still needs to be examined is how virtuous friendship is part of the nature of happiness. To understand how virtuous friendship is part of the nature of happiness, we need to recall some points made in the previous chapter. First, virtuous persons refer to individuals who are most mature morally speaking. That is, virtuous persons know what is virtuous and why something is virtuous. They desire to do what is virtuous. Generally speaking, virtuous persons love what is virtuous, and they take pleasure in doing what is virtuous.

With that in mind, let me explain how, in different ways, virtuous friendship is part of the nature of happiness. Aristotle points out that a person is

¹¹⁴ Ibid., Book VIII Chapter 13, p. 505 — 1162b7-14.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., Book VIII Chapter 3, p. 463 — 1156b25-30.

better able to contemplate the life of another person.¹¹⁶ In a virtuous friendship, both persons love the good. Donald N. Schroeder, in “Aristotle on the Good of Virtue-Friendship,” emphasizes that not only does a person appreciate and love that which makes oneself good, but also, a person loves what makes a virtuous person good. “My reading is that the foundation for both self-love and the love of a friend is the same, the love for the good.”¹¹⁷ That is, self-love and friendship between virtuous persons have at least one thing in common – appreciation and love for that which is good. Returning to the point being discussed, one person is better able to contemplate the virtuous acts of the other, and vice versa. Since both persons are virtuous, in contemplating the virtuous acts of the other person, the individual can better understand herself and better experience the pleasantness of the good. Furthermore, mentions Aristotle, “The good man’s activity therefore, which is pleasant in itself, will be more continuous if practiced with friends; and the life of the supremely happy should be continuously pleasant.”¹¹⁸

Not only is a virtuous person better able to deliberate virtuous acts and to perform virtuous acts when in a virtuous friendship, but also, a person is better able to contemplate matters of the intellect in the company of another. A person

¹¹⁶ Ibid., Book IX, Chapter 9, pp. 559 & 561, 1169b28-1170a4.

¹¹⁷ Donald N. Schroeder, “Aristotle on the Good of Virtue-Friendship,” *History of Political Thought* 13 (Summer 1992): 211.

¹¹⁸ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, in The Loeb Classical Library, Book IX Chapter 9, p. 561 — 1170a8-10.

can participate in intellectual activity longer with another person. And, a person can gain more ground by participating in intellectual activity with another.

So, how is virtuous friendship part of the nature of happiness? That virtuous friendship plays an important role in happiness is not controversial. Exactly what sort of role it plays in happiness, nevertheless, is disputed. Two possible options as to what sort of role virtuous friendship plays in happiness are: virtuous friendship is merely necessary for happiness (but not part of the nature of happiness) or virtuous friendship is part of the nature of happiness. Recall from the previous chapter that the former is saying that virtuous friendship is not an essential quality or characteristic of happiness. Rather, virtuous friendship is needed for happiness to be possible. In contrast, the latter option is saying that virtuous friendship is part of the nature of happiness. Virtuous friendship is an essential quality or characteristic of happiness.

Aristotle, I argue, describes and considers virtuous friendship as an essential quality of happiness. Take a look at what Aristotle concludes about the importance of virtuous friendship:

If then to the supremely happy man existence is desirable in itself, being good and pleasant essentially, and if his friend's existence is almost equally desirable to him, it follows that a friend is one of the things to be desired. But that which is desirable for him is bound to have, or else his condition will be incomplete in that particular. Therefore to be happy a man needs virtuous friends.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁹ Ibid., Book IX Chapter 9, p. 565 — 1170b14-19.

To explain the importance of what Aristotle is saying in this passage, let me bring back a couple of important points about happiness discussed previously.

First, the nature of happiness is defined by goods of the soul. Virtuous friendship is, according to Aristotle, a good of the soul. He shows how this is the case by likening the goodness of a friend to the goodness of the self in a virtuous friendship. Both persons in a virtuous friendship individually pursue goods of the soul, by participating in intellectual activity and virtuous activity. But, that is not all. Furthermore, a virtuous person finds the virtuous or the good pleasant and desirable. Given that each person in a virtuous friendship is virtuous, each appreciates and enjoys the other's companionship. Second, happiness also is defined by the characteristic activity of human beings. Recall that happiness involves intellectual activity and virtuous activity. It is in the active pursuit of a virtuous friendship that people can more fully exercise their reasoning ability and participate in intellectual activity and virtuous activity. Most importantly, by pursuing a virtuous friendship, a person loves what is good and is enjoying what is good. Hence, when Aristotle claims that a happy person needs virtuous friends, he means that virtuous friendship is part of the nature of happiness.

A Couple of Objections Considered

Some might object to my interpretation by insisting that virtuous friendship is not an essential characteristic of happiness. In other words, virtuous friendship is necessary for happiness, but it is not part of the nature of happiness. The most glaring piece of evidence that seems to incriminate my interpretation is Aristotle referencing friends as an external good. In a passage where he considers the question of whether friendship is necessary for happiness, he says, “But it seems strange that if we attribute all good things to the happy man we should not assign him friends, which we consider the greatest of external goods.”¹²⁰

I grant that particular types of friendship — such as utility friendship and pleasure friendship — are external goods exclusively; more will be said on these two types of friendship in the next chapter. I will even go so far as to grant that perhaps even virtuous friendship counts as an external good. However, I do not see any problems with virtuous friendship being an external good and a good of the soul at the same time. Virtuous friendship, one could argue, is an external good in that a virtuous friend helps a person further her own intellectual activity and virtuous activity. Virtuous friendship is a good of the soul insofar as each person loves the good and finds the good pleasant. Both persons in a virtuous

¹²⁰ Ibid., Book IX Chapter 9, p. 557 — 1169b9-11.

relationship are good or virtuous. Thus, a person is pursuing a good of the soul by seeking what is good, in this case, building a relationship with another virtuous person.

To deny that virtuous friendship is part of the nature of happiness is not only to miss the true meaning of virtuous friendship but also to overlook what Aristotle means by happiness. Aristotle does not spend more than two books on the topic of friendship only to speak of friendship as merely an external good. Let me reiterate some key matters concerning virtuous friendships. Assuming two virtuous persons in a (virtuous) friendship, each person individually values what is good, which includes the other person. Moreover, each person finds the good pleasant, again, which includes the other person; in other words, each finds the other pleasant. One person desires the good of the other person for that person's sake, and vice versa.

Insofar as happiness is concerned, bear in mind that the nature of happiness is final and self-sufficient. If virtuous friendship is not part of the nature of happiness, happiness fails to be self-sufficient. Something that is self-sufficient makes life choice-worthy and lacking in nothing. At the very least, a life without virtuous friendships fails to be lacking in nothing. Aristotle verifies that this is the case. In the passage provided towards the beginning of this discussion on how virtuous friendship is essentially part of happiness, Aristotle

states that a happy person must have virtuous friends, without which the person's life is incomplete: "If then to the supremely happy man existence is desirable itself, being good and pleasant essentially, and if his friend's existence is almost equally desirable to him, it follows that a friend is one of the things to be desired. . . . Therefore to be happy a man needs virtuous friends."¹²¹

Therefore, virtuous friendship is not merely needed for happiness; it is an essential characteristic of happiness.

A different objection might be raised against the view that virtuous friendship is part of the nature of happiness, claiming that this view of virtuous friendship is objectionably egoistic. The objection might go something like this. Suppose virtuous friendship is a requirement for happiness. To fulfill this criterion of happiness, a person becomes friends with another virtuous person. In doing so, a person is using another person to achieve happiness and does not value the other person for her sake. In short, friendship with another person is useful only insofar it helps a person achieve her own happiness, and hence virtuous friendship as such is objectionably egoistic.

Such an objection, I think, is grounded in a mistake. Such an objection is confusing utility friendship with virtuous friendship. What is described in the objection is characteristic of a utility friendship but not a virtuous friendship.

¹²¹ Ibid., Book IX Chapter 9, p. 565 — 1170b14-19.

The motivation of a utility friendship is utility or use. A person pursues a utility friendship with another so long as the friendship is useful to the person, but once the other person is no longer useful, motivation to continue the friendship is gone. Virtuous friendship does not work this way. On the contrary, virtuous persons individually love the good and find the good pleasant. When two virtuous persons become friends, they love the good and take pleasure in the good. The motivation in becoming friends is not the other person's utility, but rather, the motivation has to do with wanting to participate in the good or desiring communion with the good. That virtuous friendships fulfill part of the nature of happiness is merely a consequence but is not the motivation for pursuing virtuous friendships.

What has been explicated up to this point is the nature of happiness. I explained how virtuous activity, intellectual activity, and virtuous friendship are essential to happiness. In the next chapter, I examine goods that are necessary for happiness. Certain external goods, according to Aristotle, are needed for happiness to be possible, and this is the topic of discussion in the next chapter.

Chapter 4 — External Goods

Now that we have closely examined the nature of happiness and what constitutes it, what else is left to do? More is needed, according to Aristotle, for happiness to be possible. External goods are necessary for happiness. Recall a distinction that was made early on between the nature of happiness and what is necessary for happiness. That which relates to the former is essential to happiness. In contrast, anything that qualifies as the latter is needed to make happiness possible but is not an essential characteristic of happiness. The goal of this chapter is to talk about various external goods — in particular, friends, wealth, political power, good birth, satisfactory children, and personal beauty — Aristotle considers necessary for happiness.

The most telling passage in which Aristotle talks about external goods being necessary for happiness is towards the beginning of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, in which he says the following:

Nevertheless it is manifest that happiness also requires external goods in addition, as we said; for it is impossible, or at least not easy, to play a noble part unless furnished with the necessary equipment. For many noble actions require instruments for their performance, in the shape of friends or wealth or political power; also there are certain external advantages, the lack of which sullies supreme felicity, such as good birth, satisfactory children, and personal beauty: a man of very ugly appearance or low birth, or childless and alone in the world, is not our idea of a happy man,

and still less so perhaps is one who had children or friends that are worthless, or who has had good ones but lost them by death.¹²²

The remainder of this chapter is spent on explicating exactly what Aristotle is saying in that passage. One observation is that he breaks those external goods into two groups. The first group includes friends, wealth, and political power. The second group includes good birth, satisfactory children, and beauty. The former group includes external goods that are significant to some particular virtues or performing various virtuous activities, to be more precise. The latter group includes external goods that do not contribute to performing virtuous actions; however, those goods do seem to contribute to happiness in some way. I am not the only one to notice the distinction between the two groups.

Richard Mulgan also notes such a distinction between the two groups of external goods. In "Aristotle and the Value of Political Participation," he refers to friends, wealth, and political power as instruments for the performance of virtuous action. He says the following: "Thus, to exercise the ethical virtues of liberality, a person needs the external good of wealth; to exercise the virtue of friendliness, one needs to have the external goods of friends. Without the external good of health, many opportunities for virtuous action will be lost and

¹²² Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, in The Loeb Classical Library, trans. by H. Rackham, ed. Jeffrey Henderson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), Book I Chapter 8, p. 43 — 1099a31-1099b7.

so on.”¹²³ On the other hand, good birth, satisfactory children, and beauty are needed for happiness in a different way. As Mulgan puts it, “[S]ome external goods may make an independent contribution to happiness or their absence may detract from happiness.”¹²⁴

Friends

The remainder of this chapter is devoted to examining how each external good is necessary for happiness, beginning with the first group of external goods: friends, wealth, and political power. Let us start by taking a look at how friends are necessary for happiness. A point worth noting is that Aristotle does not always use *philia*, which gets translated as friendship, to refer strictly speaking to friendship as described in the previous chapter. That is, Aristotle does not always use the term friendship to refer to that which meets the three qualities of friendship: feeling good will for each other, being aware of each other’s good will, and having the cause of their good will be utility, pleasure, or virtue. When Aristotle says that many noble actions require instruments, such as friendship, he is not necessarily referring to the sort of friendship that meets those three qualities strictly speaking. Rather, he seems to be using friendship in

¹²³ Richard Mulgan, “Aristotle and the Value of Political Participation,” *Political Theory* 18 (May 1990): 200.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

a broader sense that may not fulfill all three of these qualities. To use the words of H. Rackham, the translator of the Loeb Classical Library version of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, "'friendship,' sometimes rises to the meaning of affection or love, but also includes any sort of kindly feeling, even that existing between business associates, or fellow citizens."¹²⁵

The sort of noble actions requiring friends that Aristotle probably has in mind is virtuous activity affiliated with social intercourse. Three virtues that Aristotle considers that are associated with social intercourse include: friendliness, truthfulness, and wittiness. Let us now examine each of those virtues and see how friends are necessary for actions involving those virtues.

The first virtue is the social grace of friendliness. A person who exhibits and practices this virtue expresses the appropriate amount of passion or affection for one's associates, for the right person, at the right time.¹²⁶ The opposing vices of this virtue are obsequious and quarrelsome. A person that is obsequious aims to be pleasant with everything, never being unpleasant, when coming into contact with people. On the other hand, a person who is quarrelsome objects to everything with everyone.

To answer the question of how friends are necessary for acting with the social grace of friendliness, a person must have an opportunity to practice such a

¹²⁵ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, in The Loeb Classical Library, trans. by H. Rackham, p. 450, footnote α .

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, Book IV Chapter 6, p. 237 — 1126b18-20.

virtue, and a friend provides just such an opportunity. In other words, a person needs a friend towards whom she can express the proper amount of passion or affection at the appropriate time. Thus, a virtuous person needs persons or friends in the broad sense, with whom she can exhibit friendliness.

Another way to explain how friendliness is needed for happiness is via utility friendship or pleasure friendship. Take a utility friendship for instance. Suppose one person in the friendship is a really young person, who is in the least mature level of moral development. This young person neither knows what is virtuous nor knows how something is virtuous. But, she desires to become virtuous. In this example, she pursues a friendship with a virtuous person that happens to be much older. Suppose that what is motivating the young person to pursue this relationship with the older virtuous person is utility. By spending time with the older virtuous person and watching how that person responds in social intercourse with others, the younger person can experience the virtue of friendliness in action. Second, the older virtuous person can guide the younger person in acting virtuously, by rewarding her with pleasure when she acts correctly (or by punishing her when she does not act correctly). The older virtuous person also benefits from the friendship. The older virtuous person has the opportunity, through this relationship, to mold and shape the virtuous

character of an individual and to take an active part in the maturing of this person morally.

The second virtue relating to social intercourse is truthfulness.

Truthfulness involves being truthful when nothing is at stake and being truthful for the sake of truth. Aristotle has the following to say about a person that is truthful: “We are speaking not of truthfulness in business relations nor in matters where honesty and dishonesty are concerned, but of cases where a man is truthful both in speech and conduct when no considerations of honesty come in, from an habitual sincerity of disposition.”¹²⁷ So, a truthful person is motivated to be truthful for the sake of being truthful, not for some ulterior motive. Contrast truthfulness with its vices. The opposing vices of truthfulness are boastfulness and self-deprecation. A person who is boastful exaggerates her merits for no ulterior motives or for some ulterior motives. Those that exaggerate their merits for no ulterior motives, Aristotle deems more foolish than vicious.¹²⁸ A genuine vice of truthfulness is a boastful person who exaggerates her own merit for ulterior motives. A person can possess a variety of ulterior motives, oftentimes self-serving or self-aggrandizing in purpose. As for the other vice, a person that is self-deprecating disclaims what she has. In other words, to use Aristotle’s words, “Self-depreciators, who understate their own merits, seem of a more

¹²⁷ Ibid., Book IV Chapter 7, p. 341 — 1127a33-b4.

¹²⁸ Ibid., Book IV Chapter 7, p. 243 — 1127b9-12.

refined character, for we feel that the emotive underlying this form of insincerity is not gain but dislike of ostentation.”¹²⁹ Comparing the two vices of truthfulness, being self-deprecating is better than being boastful, since the former has better motives. Those who are self-deprecating want to avoid being pretentious or showy, where as those who are boastful want to brag.

Friends are necessary for truthfulness or for the activity of being truthful in much the same way friends are necessary for the social grace of friendliness. A person needs to have the opportunity to practice being truthful, and a friend provides such an opportunity. That is, a person needs persons or friends towards whom she can be truthful for the sake of truth and not some ulterior motive. So, a person needs persons or friends, in the broader sense, towards whom she can be truthful.

Let us now turn to the third virtue affiliated with social intercourse, wittiness. Like all the other virtues, wittiness is a mean between two vices, in this case, buffoonery and boorishness. A person who exhibits wittiness makes clever and humorous comments that are tasteful. To use Aristotle’s words, “The middle disposition is further characterized by the quality of tact, the possessor of which will say, and allow be said to him, only the sort of things that are suitable

¹²⁹ Ibid., Book IV Chapter 7, pp. 243 & 245 — 1127b23-24.

to a virtuous man and a gentleman . . .”¹³⁰ In contrast, a person that is a buffoon cannot resist a jest, whatever the cost. A buffoon will make a joke even in the most inappropriate circumstances and inappropriate times. On the opposite extreme, a boorish person cannot make a joke at all or cannot put up with those who do joke.

To be able to be witty, a person must have an audience. A person must have persons or friends with whom she can be witty. Thus, a person needs friends to exhibit wittiness.

Wealth

Let us next turn to the external good of wealth or fortune. Aristotle says that any serious loss in fortune results in unhappiness.

For many reverses and vicissitudes of all sorts occur in the course of life, and it is possible that the most prosperous man may encounter great disasters in his declining years, as the story is told of Priam in the epics; but no one calls a man happy who meets with misfortunes like Priam’s, and comes to a miserable end.”¹³¹

In what way, precisely, is wealth needed for happiness? At the very least, having a requisite amount of wealth allows a person to participate in virtuous activities concerning money: liberality and magnificence.

¹³⁰ Ibid., Book IV Chapter 7, p. 247 — 1128a17-18.

¹³¹ Ibid., Book I Chapter 9, p. 47 — 1100a6-11.

Liberality is a virtue concerning money. In particular, the liberal person gives the right amount to the right person, at the right time, under appropriate circumstances. Moreover, the liberal person is more focused on giving money than receiving it. As Aristotle puts the matter, "Hence the liberal man is more concerned with giving to the right recipients than with getting wealth from the right sources and not getting it from the wrong ones."¹³² And, a liberal person gives for the sake of giving; a liberal person gives because giving is the right thing to do in a given situation. "[T]he liberal man therefore will give for the nobility of giving. And he will give rightly, for he will give to the right people, and the right amount, and at the right time, and fulfill all the other conditions of right giving."¹³³ Though the emphasis is more on giving, Aristotle points out that a liberal person will not take money from inappropriate sources either. Instead, a liberal person will make money from her own possessions, since money is needed for one to be able to give.¹³⁴

Therein lies the reason wealth is necessary for happiness. Aristotle puts the matter succinctly, "But [the liberal person] will acquire wealth from the proper source, that is, from his own possessions, not because he thinks it is a noble thing to do, but because it is a necessary condition of having the means to

¹³² Ibid., Book IV Chapter 1, p. 191 — 1120a10-12.

¹³³ Ibid., Book IV Chapter 1, pp. 191 & 193 — 1120a22-25.

¹³⁴ Ibid., Book IV Chapter 1, p. 193 — 1120a32-1120b2.

give.”¹³⁵ Having money is a necessary requirement for giving money to the right persons, in the right amount, at the right time. Hence, possessing wealth is necessary for a person to be able to give liberally or generously.

Wealth is also needed for practicing another virtue, magnificence. While liberality is a virtue dealing with small amounts of money, magnificence is a virtue concerning larger sums of money. Another difference between liberality and magnificence is that the former concerns dealing with money in general but the latter focuses on how wealth is spent specifically. A magnificent person possesses the disposition to spend her money well, in appropriate ways and on appropriate things. In other words, “The magnificent man is an artist in expenditure: he can discern what is suitable, and spend great sums with good taste. . . . So the magnificent man’s expenditure is suitable as well as great.”¹³⁶

In order for a person to spend significant amounts of money in a suitable fashion, the person must possess a sizeable amount of money, almost a lavish amount of money. A person must be in possession of a large sum of money to be capable of acting with magnificence. Thus, wealth is necessary for performing the virtue of magnificence.

To sum up what has been said so far about the role of the external good of wealth, a certain amount of wealth is needed for happiness. A person must have

¹³⁵ Ibid., Book IV Chapter 1, p. 193 — 1120a35-1120b2.

¹³⁶ Ibid., Book IV Chapter 2, pp. 205 & 207 — 1122a33-1122b1.

a certain level of wealth to be liberal or magnificent. To be liberal or magnificent is to be virtuous insofar as money is concerned, and participating in virtuous activity is necessary for happiness. And, minimally, wealth is needed for happiness inasmuch that it makes certain virtuous activity possible.

Political Power

Let us take a look at the last external good in the first group of external goods, political power. What sort of role does political power play in happiness? Political power is necessary, I believe, in virtue of the fact that human beings are social or political by nature. The precise role of political power in happiness is not crystal clear, given that Aristotle does not say all that much about the matter in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Two approaches, I think, offer some clarity as to what Aristotle has in mind.

Aristotle mentions that honor is affiliated with the political life. One approach to explaining how political power is needed for happiness is to say that participating in political office provides a person with the chance to engage in virtuous activity concerning honor. The virtue associated with honor is *megalopsuchia*, which is most frequently translated as greatness of soul or pride. A great-souled man is a person that is concerned predominantly with the greatest external good, which Aristotle designates, honor. "Therefore," says

Aristotle, “the great-souled man is he who has the right disposition in relation to honours and disgraces. And even without argument it is evident that honour is the object with which the great-souled are concerned, since it is honour above all else which great men claim and deserve.”¹³⁷ Honor is not a good that a person can bestow upon oneself. Rather, honor is a good that is bestowed by others. By exhibiting political power in honorable ways while in office — such as returning services done for him, helping others whenever possible, rarely asking for help from others, just to name a few¹³⁸ — a person performs activities with greatness of soul. Hence, utilizing one’s political power by participating in political office makes the virtuous activity of the greatness of soul possible. And, so, political power is needed for happiness.

Another approach to explain how political power is necessary for happiness involves the fact that human beings are political by nature. That is, human beings are political animals. As political animals, human beings must live and be a part of a *polis* or city-state. According to this approach, having political power is necessary for happiness insofar as human beings by their very nature are political animals. This approach over and above the other approach is the one Mulgan favors. He, in “Aristotle and the Value of Political Participation,” says, “Thus, the argument that man is a political animal does not

¹³⁷ Ibid., Book IV Chapter 3, p. 217 — 1123b21-24.

¹³⁸ Ibid., Book IV Chapter 3, pp. 221 & 223 — 1124b9-26.

imply that man must participate in politics to become virtuous, only that he must literally be a part of a *polis* and live under its laws.”¹³⁹ Broyer makes a similar point in “Aristotle: Is ‘Happiness’ Ambiguous?” In speaking of the sorts of lives necessary for happiness, he says, “. . . quite simply, politics is in one sense necessary as the *consummation* of man’s nature as a political animal, in another sense is *instrumental* to providing conditions favorable for appearance of the well-being and contemplation necessary for happiness.”¹⁴⁰ Based on the fact that human beings are political animals by nature, persons living a solitary life cannot be happy.

I, too, favor the second approach in explaining how political power is necessary for happiness. The problem with the first approach is that being in political office is merely one opportunity to do activities that exhibit greatness of soul. The first approach does not explain how political power is necessary for happiness in all cases, not just those who take political office. Moreover, the second approach is preferable because it does a better job of explaining how, in general, political power is needed for happiness. A person does not need to be in political office to have a chance to engage in virtuous activity concerning honor. Having political power and exercising political power mean that, as citizens of a city-state, persons must do actions that exhibit greatness of soul. Persons must

¹³⁹ Mulgan, 205.

¹⁴⁰ John Albin Broyer, “Aristotle: Is ‘Happiness’ Ambiguous?” *Midwestern Journal of Philosophy* (Spring 1973): 4.

be concerned with doing what is honorable, including helping others whenever possible, returning services done for them, and rarely asking for help. So, political power is necessary for happiness inasmuch as a person must be a part of a city-state to be able to act with greatness of soul.

Good Birth, Good Children, and Beauty

What remains to be discussed are the external goods in the second group: good birth, good children, and beauty. Aristotle has very few comments in the way of providing an account of how they are each individually necessary for happiness. Instead, he more or less treats them as a group. That is what I also shall do here. In contrast to the first group of external goods, none of the goods in this second group help us perform virtuous actions per se. Aristotle certainly does not claim otherwise. Rather, good birth, good children, and beauty do contribute an important role in happiness, namely, any significant loss in those goods mars a person's happiness. He says the following about the second group of external goods:

[T]here are certain external advantages, the lack of which sullies supreme felicity, such as good birth, satisfactory children, and personal beauty: a man of very ugly appearance or low birth, or childless and alone in the world, is not our idea of a happy man,

and still less so perhaps is one who has children or friends that are worthless, or who has had good ones but lost them by death.¹⁴¹

As far as I can tell, good birth, good children, and beauty are necessary for happiness by common conception. According to Aristotle, people generally or commonly believe that without good birth, satisfactory children, or beauty, a person is not happy. This sort of explanation does not suffice in explaining how good birth, good children, and beauty are necessary for happiness.

Perhaps Aristotle might have the following in mind. Though none of the external goods in the second group play a direct role in helping a person perform virtuous acts, the absence of any of these goods prevents a person from being able to act virtuously. Take any one of these external goods, such as beauty, as an example. Suppose a person is born really hideous. Before I delve into an example, recall that during the time of Aristotle, beauty was valued as a good in and of itself. A person who does not possess such a good is not valued as highly or perhaps is not valued much at all. Coming back to the illustration, even if the person develops her reasoning capacity quite well, she will not have much of a chance to perform virtuous activities, because people will not give her much of a chance to act virtuously. They will not give this person much of a chance because they see her as utterly hideous. So, not having one of the external goods

¹⁴¹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, in The Loeb Classical Library, trans. by H. Rackham, Book I Chapter 8, p. 43 — 1099b3-6.

in the second group prevents a person from being able to act virtuously. That is why good birth, satisfactory children, and beauty are needed for happiness.

Pleasure

By now, I have taken a look at all the external goods Aristotle explicitly discusses in the *Nicomachean Ethics* as necessary for happiness — friends, wealth, political power, good birth, satisfactory children, and beauty. However, I would like to close this chapter by talking about another good, pleasure, and its role in happiness. Pleasure does play an important role in happiness, but before detailing what role it plays, let us distinguish between two kinds of pleasure.

One kind of pleasure is a lower kind of pleasure or pleasure in a secondary extent. Such a sort of pleasure is merely physical. For Aristotle, a life of pleasure does not constitute happiness in any way. One of the first indications of this is when Aristotle talks about three types of lives people live, he ranks the life of pleasure as the lowest. In response to the life of pleasure, Aristotle makes the following comment: “The generality of mankind then show themselves to be utterly slavish, by preferring what is only a life for cattle; but they get a hearing for their view as reasonable because many persons of high position share the feelings of Sardanapallus.”¹⁴² Aristotle is here referring to the epitaph of a

¹⁴² Ibid., Book I Chapter 5, p. 15 — 1095b19-22.

mythical Assyrian king, Sardanapallus. Two versions of this epitaph are: "Eat, drink, play, since all else is not worth that snap of the fingers" and "I have what I ate; and the delightful deeds of wantonness and love which I did and suffered; whereas all my wealth is vanished."¹⁴³ By a life of pleasure, Aristotle is referring to a life in which people place pleasure as their sole goal. It is this sort of life that does not play an integral part in happiness. The end of all actions cannot possibly be pleasure. Anyone who makes such a pursuit cannot rightfully be called happy.

Nonetheless, that is not to say that pleasure plays no role in happiness. Another kind of pleasure is human pleasure of the fullest extent. What I mean by that is pleasure that naturally follows from actions a person performs. For instance, a virtuous person feels pleasure as a result of being friendly or acting liberally. More generally, a virtuous person feels pleasure as a consequence of performing virtuous acts. In other words, a morally mature person or a virtuous person takes pleasure in doing virtuous acts.

Paula Gottlieb, in "Aristotle's Ethical Egoism," makes the same distinction I have just explained, between pursuing pleasure as a goal and pleasure following as a consequence of participating in certain activities.

According to Aristotle, true pleasure is not a directly motivating goal for the good person – it does not provide the reason why a

¹⁴³ Ibid., pp. 14-15, footnote *b*.

good person enjoys the things that he does. Rather, according to Aristotle, pleasure comes about as the result of the good person's having the appropriate attitudes to what is independently good. It is not the cause but the result of the good person's caring about the good things . . .¹⁴⁴

Having pleasure as the goal is different from getting pleasure as a result of pursuing some other goal insofar as the former involves setting pleasure as the focus and the latter does not place ultimate emphasis on pleasure.

Human pleasures of the fullest extent must be distinguished from human pleasures of the secondary extent. Human pleasures of the fullest extent are not defined entirely by the mere pleasure of eating and satisfying one's appetite. Rather, human pleasures of the fullest extent, to a large degree, have to do with performing activities that are a part of the nature of happiness. Performing virtuous acts, for a good person, is pleasant. Likewise, participating in intellectual activity is pleasant. Of the relationship between happiness and pleasure, Aristotle says, "And again we suppose that happiness must contain an element of pleasure: now activity in accordance with wisdom is admittedly the most pleasant of the activities in accordance with virtue . . ."¹⁴⁵ Thus, good persons naturally feel pleasure from pursuing acts that are part of the nature of

¹⁴⁴ Paula Gottlieb, "Aristotle's Ethical Egoism," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 79 (March 1996): 5.

¹⁴⁵ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, in The Loeb Classical Library, trans. by H. Rackham, Book X Chapter 7, p. 613 — 1177a23-25.

happiness, whether they are virtuous acts, intellectual activity, or (virtuous) friendships.

Happiness after Death

Up to this point, I have defined what Aristotle means by happiness. I have explicated the nature of happiness as well as goods necessary for happiness. Before proceeding any further, I would like to take some time to discuss what happens to a person's happiness after death. A person who, over the course of her life, has actively pursued activities affiliated with the nature of happiness (intellectual activity, virtuous activity, pursuit of friendships) and possesses an adequate amount of various external goods is happy.

May not we then confidently pronounce that man happy who realizes complete goodness in action, and is adequately furnished with external goods? Or should we add, that he must also be destined to go on living not for any casual period but throughout a complete lifetime in the same manner, and to die accordingly, because the future is hidden from us, and we conceive of happiness as an end, something utterly and absolutely final and complete? If this is so, we shall pronounce those of the living who possess and are destined to go on possessing the good things we have specified to be supremely blessed, though on a human scale.¹⁴⁶

Those who continue pursuing intellectual activity, virtuous activity, friendships, and continue possessing certain external goods are *makarios* or blessed. Aristotle draws particular attention to intellectual activity when discussing blessedness.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., Book I Chapter 10, p. 55 — 1101a14-23.

“The whole of the life of the gods is blessed (*makarios*), and that of man is so in so far as it contains some likeness to the divine activity; but none of the other animals possess happiness, because they are entirely incapable of contemplation.”¹⁴⁷

Concerning a person’s happiness after death, a person’s happiness or happiness does not change after death. To claim that happiness of dead is completely unaffected by relatives or friends, in particular fortunes or misfortunes of relatives or friends, is too extreme. “That the happiness of the dead is not influenced at all by the fortunes of their descendants and their friends in general seems too heartless a doctrine, and contrary to accepted beliefs.”¹⁴⁸ Rather, a significant loss of fortunes or a tremendous amount of misfortunes that may befall the relatives or friends of the dead can make the deceased unhappy when the person was happy. “It does then appear that the dead are influenced in some measure by the good fortunes of their friends, and likewise by their misfortunes, but that the effect is not of such a kind or degree as to render the happy unhappy or *vice versa*.”¹⁴⁹

So far, I have explicated Aristotle’s conception of happiness. In the next chapter, I compare Aristotle with a philosopher before Aristotle’s time, Confucius. Aristotle and Confucius share important similarities concerning their

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., Book X Chapter 8, pp. 623 & 625 — 1178b26-28.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., Book I Chapter 11, p. 55 — 1101a22-24.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., Book I Chapter 11, p. 57 — 1101b6-9.

general approach to ethics. Before detailing these similarities, I spend the next chapter talking about Confucius and discussing relevant background information on Confucius.

Chapter 5 – Confucius

Through the course of the discussion thus far, I have attempted to elucidate Aristotle's conception of happiness. In particular, I have examined Aristotle's conception of happiness in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Happiness, according to Aristotle, is the good for humankind, and I have spent no small amount describing that good for humankind. Aristotle is not the only one concerned about the good for humankind. Confucius also is concerned with the good for humankind, though he takes a different approach to the discussion of the good for humankind. He does not determine the highest good for humankind and develop a conception of the good for humankind from it.

Rather, Confucius is looking for a solution to the misery people generally were experiencing during his time. The answer, according to Confucius, involves returning to the happier times of the Zhou dynasty, in particular to various practices during the Zhou dynasty. The point in claiming that Confucius has a different approach to the discussion is not to say that Aristotle and Confucius share nothing in common whatsoever, regarding their approach to the good of humankind. Aristotle and Confucius share some important similarities in their approach to virtue ethics. What the two philosophers do share in common will be the focus of the next chapter.

The Good for Humankind

In this chapter, however, the goal is to examine Confucius's approach to the good for humankind. What sort of character does a good person have? What sort of activities does a person need to perform regularly and habitually to live a good life or to become a good person? Living a good life involves participating in activities that build good character. According to Confucius, seeking the good of humankind involves, first of all, performing virtuous acts and ritual propriety of the Zhou dynasty. Individuals perform virtuous acts and acts of ritual propriety by activity and habituation. But, education also is needed for individuals to be able to perform virtuous acts and acts of ritual propriety. It is through education that individuals learn how and why persons ought to behave a certain way. Let us first talk about virtuous activity and how it is significant to the good life. In the remainder of this chapter, I further discuss each one of these points.

Virtuous Activity Needed for Living the Good Life

A crucial component of living the good life, for Confucius, is activity, namely performing virtuous activity. To live a good life, a person must become a good person. To become a good person, an individual must consistently and habitually perform acts that develop a good character.

That an individual must consistently and habitually perform acts to develop a good character is especially obvious in cases where parents are attempting to raise good and decent children. In my parents' generation, for instance, parents wanted their children to be honest, self-sufficient, and hard-workers, amongst other things. Being honest when speaking with family, friends, acquaintances, or strangers is valued as characteristic of a good person. By being self-sufficient, what I mean is, parents want their children ultimately to be financially independent. Parents hope their children can live on their own one day and pay for their own living expenses. And, parents desire their children to be hard-workers. While a child is still in school, working hard means learning well and making good grades in school. When individuals are employed in an occupation, working hard involves excelling in their tasks and working towards a raise or promotion. None of these character traits — being honest, being self-sufficient, and being hard-working — come by taking no action whatsoever. Rather, people develop such characters by pursuing activities necessary to becoming honest, self-sufficient, and hard-working.

Likewise, according to Confucius, people develop into good persons, or persons of good character, by consistently and habitually practicing acts that build good character. Some character traits Confucius considers crucial to

becoming a good person include: *ren*, *li*, living according to the *dao*, and *yi*. In the following discussion, let us examine each of these traits a bit more closely.

Ren

Ren is the term that correlates to virtue or excellence. Some common translations of *ren* include: authoritative conduct, goodness, benevolence, humaneness, or authoritative person. According to Confucius, as stated in the *Doctrine of the Mean*, “Benevolence [*ren*] is the characteristic element of humanity, and the great exercise of it is in loving relatives.”¹⁵⁰ As Jiyuan Yu, in “Virtue: Confucius and Aristotle,” correctly notes, “The term *ren* consists of two components, meaning respectively, ‘human’ and ‘two,’ and points toward human relationships. It is this sense that figures in Confucius’ basic teaching that by learning to be good one becomes a person of *ren*.”¹⁵¹

As for exactly how Confucius uses the term, *ren*, in the *Analects*, he is not entirely consistent. At times, *ren* is used in reference to a virtue we should cultivate. The particular virtue that should be cultivated is love, in particular filial love and fraternal love. We can see that this is the case from a passage in the *Analects*, in which Master You says, “As for filial and fraternal responsibility,

¹⁵⁰ James Legge, trans., *Confucius: Confucian Analects, The Great Learning & The Doctrine of the Mean* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1971), 405 — Book XX, 20.5.

¹⁵¹ Jiyuan Yu, “Virtue: Confucius and Aristotle,” *Philosophy East and West* 48 (April 1998): 323.

it is, I suspect the root of authoritative conduct (*ren*).”¹⁵² Regarding *ren* as love, Jiyuan Yu, in “Virtue: Confucius and Aristotle,” states that “Filial love is crucial because Confucius believes that gratitude and affection towards one’s parents enable one willingly to accept parental authority and the hierarchical relation between parent and child.”¹⁵³ Thus, expressing respect and love towards family members, especially parents, is characteristic of a good person.

Let me take a moment to emphasize that Confucius places significant emphasis on filial piety. For Confucius, as Bina Gupta points out in *Ethical Questions: East and West*, “The beginning of [*r*]en is found in *Hsiao*, or filial piety.”¹⁵⁴ When asked about filial piety by one of his disciples, Zixia, Confucius responds by saying, “It all lies in showing the proper countenance. As for the young contributing their energies when there is work to be done, and deferring to their elders when there is wine and food to be had—how can merely doing this be considered being filial?”¹⁵⁵ This follows Confucius’s remark that providing for parents is not enough; children must also respect their parents. “Those who are filial are considered so because they are able to provide for their parents. But even dogs and horses are given that much care. If you do not

¹⁵² Roger T. Ames and Henry Rosemont, Jr., ed., *The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1998), 71 — Book I, 1.2.

¹⁵³ Jiyuan Yu, “Virtue: Confucius and Aristotle,” 332.

¹⁵⁴ Bina Gupta, ed., *Ethical Questions: East and West* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2002), 142.

¹⁵⁵ Roger T. Ames and Henry Rosemont, Jr., ed., *The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation*, 78 — Book II, 2.8.

respect your parents, what is the difference?"¹⁵⁶ Moreover, filial piety means more than uttering words parents desire to hear. In a response to a question posited by Master You, Confucius notes, "It is a rare thing for glib speech and an insinuating appearance to accompany authoritative conduct (*ren*)."¹⁵⁷ As for fraternal submission, not much is said about this virtue, other than it, along with filial piety, is the root of *ren*. Master You points out, "As for filial and fraternal responsibility, it is, I suspect, the root of authoritative conduct (*ren*)."¹⁵⁸

Other times, *ren* functions as an ethical ideal that a person should strive to attain. People can reach *ren* if they cultivate virtues. For example, exhibiting proper behavior towards family members is the root of *ren*. The same passage Yu cites as demonstrating *ren* as a particular virtue, I think, also talks about *ren* as an ethical ideal. Master You, who was considered one of the honorific by Confucius's inner circle,¹⁵⁹ in speaking with Confucius, notes, "Exemplary persons (*junzi*) concentrate their efforts on the root, for the root having taken hold, the way (*dao*) will grow therefrom. As for filial and fraternal responsibility, it is, I suspect, the root of authoritative conduct (*ren*)."¹⁶⁰ A few passages later, Confucius urges that not only should we cultivate and exercise certain virtues, such as showing respectful behavior to parents and carrying positive attitudes of

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 77 — Book II, 2.7.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 71 — Book I, 1.3.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 71 — Book I, 1.2.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 71 — footnote by Ames and Rosemont at the end of 1.2 in Chapter I.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 71 — Book I, 1.2.

others, but also, we must “be intimate with those who are authoritative in their conduct (*ren*).”¹⁶¹ Another example of *ren* as an ethical ideal is found later in the *Analects*. In response to Fan Chi’s inquiry about *ren*, Confucius says, “At home be deferential, in handling public affairs be respectful, and do your utmost (*zhong*) in your relationship with others. Even if you were to go and live among the Yi or Di barbarians, you could not do without such an attitude.”¹⁶² In this example, a person must maintain three virtues: courtesy, diligence, and loyalty. When these three virtues are met, *ren* is reached. In short, regarding *ren* as an ethical ideal, J. E. Tiles, in *Moral Measures: An Introduction to Ethics West and East*, makes the following remark: “The safest approach therefore is to adopt Chan’s translation, understanding ‘humane’ [or *ren*] as ‘whatever characteristic makes one an exemplary human being.’”¹⁶³

Whatever the case, *ren* as an ethical ideal is to be practiced in conjunction with *li* or by returning to *li*. For, Confucius claims the following:

Through self-discipline and observing ritual propriety (*li*) one becomes authoritative [*ren*] in one’s conduct. If for the space of a day one were able to accomplish this, the whole empire would defer this authoritative model. Becoming authoritative in one’s conduct is self-originating—how could it originate with others?¹⁶⁴

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 72 — Book I, 1.6.

¹⁶² Ibid., 167 — Book XIII, 13.19.

¹⁶³ J. E. Tiles, *Moral Measures: An Introduction to Ethics West and East* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 197.

¹⁶⁴ Roger T. Ames and Henry Rosemont, Jr., ed., *The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation*, 152 — Book 12, 12.1.

Yu, in "Virtue: Confucius and Aristotle," seems correct in explaining the relationship between *ren* and *li*: "When Confucius claims that *ren* means to return to *li*, he is asking each agent to act in conformity with social values, and thereby become accepted and respected by the society or tradition he or she is in."¹⁶⁵ More on the relationship between *ren* and *li* later. Let us first discuss the concept of *li*.

Li

Li plays a significant role insofar as virtuous activity is concerned. *Li* is oftentimes translated as ritual, rites, customs, etiquette, propriety, ritual propriety, morals, rules of proper behavior, or worship. Conforming to *li* when we act is important. In particular, Confucius thinks we should conform to the customs or ritual propriety of the Zhou dynasty.

Some practices of *li* are specific. For example, when approaching a king or ruler, a person should wear a cap. Moreover, a person should bow upon entering the hall of a king or ruler. Confucius makes the following comments:

The use of a hemp cap is prescribed in the observance of ritual propriety (*li*). Nowadays, that a silk cap is used instead is a matter of frugality. I would follow accepted practice on this. A subject kowtowing on entering the hall is prescribed in the observance of ritual propriety (*li*). Nowadays that one kowtows only after

¹⁶⁵ Jiyuan Yu, "Virtue: Confucius and Aristotle," 327.

ascending the hall is a matter of hubris. Although it goes contrary to accepted practice, I still kowtow on entering the hall.¹⁶⁶

Switching from a hemp cap to a silk cap saves people money without dishonoring or disrespecting the king. However, not bowing to the king upon entering the hall is not a practice that can be eliminated, according to Confucius, since bowing upon entering the hall is a sign of paying respect to the king.

Confucius also talks about practices of *li* in public and practices of *li* in private. For instance, regarding public matters, the practices of ritual propriety define how rulers are to treat their ministers. “Rulers should employ their ministers by observing ritual propriety (*li*), and ministers should serve their lord by doing their utmost (*zhong*).”¹⁶⁷ By acting in accordance with ritual propriety, a king or ruler’s subjects will be motivated to act appropriately. As Confucius puts the matter: “If their superiors cherished the observance of ritual propriety (*li*), none among the common people [*xiao ren*] would dare be disrespectful; if their superiors cherished appropriate conduct (*yi*), none among the common people would dare be disobedient . . .”¹⁶⁸

Insofar as practices of *li* within a home are concerned, he focuses mainly on how children are to respond to their parents. When parents are still alive, children must act with ritual propriety. To use Confucius’s words, “While they

¹⁶⁶ Roger T. Ames and Henry Rosemont, Jr., ed., *The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation*, 126 — Book IX, 9.3.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 86 — Book III, 3.19.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 163 — Book XIII, 13.4.

are living, serve them according to the observances of ritual propriety (*li*) . . .”¹⁶⁹

The sort of observances of ritual propriety Confucius has in mind, at the very least, includes not only providing for parents, but genuinely respecting parents.

“[Filial conduct] lies in showing the proper countenance.”¹⁷⁰ People ought to do actions for the right reasons, with the right motive. In this case, children must respect their parents because their parents should be respected. Once the parents die, the responsibility to act in observance of ritual propriety does not end.

Children must bury the parents properly. “. . . when they are dead, bury them and sacrifice to them according to the observances of ritual propriety.”¹⁷¹

Children should mourn the death of a parent for three years. Furthermore, a person should not change the ways (*dao*) of his or her late father for three years following his death. Confucius says, “A person who for three years refrains from reforming the ways (*dao*) of his late father can be called a filial son (*xiao*).”¹⁷²

What must not be overlooked is that *li* must be practiced in conjunction with *ren*. *Li* by itself or *li* without *ren* involves performing acts that, in the end, are meaningless. Children that provide for their parents and nothing more, for example, means very little to nothing. Take a child who provides for parents but has some ulterior motives for doing so. Perhaps the child desires particular favor

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 77 — Book II, 2.5.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 78 — Book II, 2.8.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 77 — Book II, 2.5.

¹⁷² Ibid., 93 — Book IV, 4.20.

with the parents. In this case, providing for the parents is practicing *li* without *ren*. The child is not providing for the parents out of respect for the parents. Confucius claims, “Those today who are filial are considered so because they are able to provided for their parents. But even dogs and horses are given that much care. If you do not respect your parents, what is the difference?”¹⁷³ Ritual propriety must be practiced with good purpose. In the case of how children should respond towards their parents, children must genuinely respect their parents for practices of ritual propriety to be meaningful. Thus, without *ren*, *li* collapses.

The relationship between *ren* and *li* goes the other direction as well. *Ren* is cultivated by practicing *li* or ritual propriety. To use the words of Confucius, “Through self-discipline and observing ritual propriety (*li*) one becomes authoritative [*ren*] in one’s conduct.”¹⁷⁴ People do not become *ren* or authoritative in their conduct by observing ritual propriety once or twice. Rather, they must consistently and regularly act according to ritual propriety to become authoritative. Once people become authoritative in their conduct, they need a way to show *ren*. Without *li* or ritual propriety, *ren* cannot be seen. Therefore, *ren* and *li* go hand in hand.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 77 — Book II, 2.7.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 152 — Book XII, 12.1.

Dao

Another characteristic necessary for a good person, in addition to *ren* and *li*, is living in accordance with the *dao*. *Dao* has several related meanings. A couple of these meanings are: the way, in terms of path or road; and, the correct way to do something. As for the former, Confucius favors the way of the Zhou dynasty. Creel, in *Chinese Thought*, makes the following observation: *dao* is “the Way of the ancients as it could be reconstructed from the stories told about the founders of the [Z]hou dynasty and the demi-gods who had preceded them.”¹⁷⁵ As for the latter meaning, *dao* also means the correct way to do things. To use Creel’s words, *dao* refers to “the way above all other ways that men should follow. Its goal [is] happiness, in this life, here and now, for all [humankind].”¹⁷⁶ People who desire to live a good life, claims Confucius, will always live according to the *dao*. *Jun zi* or virtuous persons always live according to the way or path. They always behave appropriately in the company of others and associate with other persons following the way. “In eating, exemplary persons (*junzi*) do not look for a full stomach, nor in their lodgings for comfort and contentment. They are persons of action yet cautious in what they say. They

¹⁷⁵ Herrlee G. Creel, *Chinese Thought: From Confucius to Mao Tse-Tung* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1953), 31.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 33.

repair to those who know the way (*dao*), and find improvement in their company.”¹⁷⁷

Yi

Besides displaying *ren*, practicing *li*, and living according to the *dao*, a good person also does what is *yi*. Some common translations of *yi* include: appropriate, fitting, right, moral, morality, and sense of duty. As Ames and Rosemont, in *The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation*, note, the term *yi* is to be understood on a number of levels. They note that *yi* “. . . should be understood in terms of not only its aesthetic and moral connotations, but also with its social and religious implications as well.”¹⁷⁸ *Jun zi* or virtuous persons always do what is *yi* or appropriate. To use the words of Confucius, “Exemplary persons (*junzi*) in making their way in the world are neither bent on nor against anything; rather, they go with what is appropriate (*yi*).”¹⁷⁹ When deciding what to do, virtuous persons know that what is appropriate involves thinking beyond themselves. “Exemplary persons (*junzi*) understand what is appropriate (*yi*); petty persons [*xiao ren*] understand what is of personal advantage (*li*).”¹⁸⁰ The

¹⁷⁷ Roger T. Ames and Henry Rosemont, Jr., ed., *The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation*, 74-75 — Book I, 1.14.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 55.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 91 — Book IV, 4.10.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 92 — Book IV, 4.16.

basic point of *yi* is that a person ought to do what is appropriate or right, given the circumstances.

The Importance of Education in Living the Good Life

Doing activities that are needed for living a good life or becoming a good person — exhibiting *ren*, practicing *li*, living according to the *dao*, and doing what is *yi* — are not enough. Persons must also learn how to act and why people should act in a certain way (demonstrate *ren*, practice *li*, live according to the *dao*, and do what is *yi*). This is where education plays an important role.

Knowledge plays an important role in cultivating virtues. Most people must be educated or taught how to act. People exhibit different levels of knowledge. According to Confucius:

Knowledge (*zhi*) acquired through a natural propensity for it is its highest level; knowledge acquired through study is the next highest; something learned in response to difficulties encountered is again the next highest. But those among the common people who do not learn even when vexed with difficulties — they are at the bottom of the heap.¹⁸¹

Very few persons are born with knowledge. I surmise that Confucius holds that only Divine Sages are born with knowledge. According to David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames, in *Thinking Through Confucius*, although Confucius does not explicitly refer to himself as a sage, he seems to acknowledge having qualities of

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 199 — Book XVI, 16.9.

a sage. “Although Confucius modestly disclaims the title of sage, this modesty must be measured against the fact that he claims to be the embodiment of the Chou [or Zhou] culture, and the heir to the sage-king, Wen.”¹⁸² Next are those who become wise by learning. Perhaps Confucius would openly place himself in the category of those who become wise by learning. After all, he maintains that he has much to learn from a group, even as small in number as three persons. “In strolling in the company of just two other persons, I am bound to find a teacher. Identifying their strengths, I follow them, and identifying their weaknesses, I reform myself accordingly.”¹⁸³ Generally speaking, Confucius has a high regard for studying and learning. And, in some ways, he sees that as a preventative measure from making mistakes. He makes the following comment: “Let me live for a few more years so that I will have had fifty years of study in which after all I will have remained free of any serious oversight.”¹⁸⁴

People cannot learn to be virtuous on their own. People, by nature, are social beings. Through the assistance of others, persons become virtuous. Ames and Rosemont also emphasize the social aspect of Confucius’s approach to ethics, when they discuss the concept of *ren*. “This etymological analysis [of *ren*] underscores the Confucian assumption that one cannot become a person by

¹⁸² David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames, *Thinking Through Confucius* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1987), 256.

¹⁸³ Roger T. Ames and Henry Rosemont, Jr., ed., *The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation*, 116 — Book VII, 7.22.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 115 — Book VII, 7.17.

oneself—we are, from our inchoate beginnings, irreducibly social.”¹⁸⁵ Again, some common translations of *ren* include: goodness, benevolence, humaneness, and authoritative person. Ames and Rosemont translate *ren* as authoritative conduct. They are not using authoritative in a political sense. Neither is the term being used to refer to sheer power. Ames and Rosemont use authoritative in a moral sense, referring to persons who are authorities on goodness. In returning to the topic of learning to be virtuous, the process of learning to be virtuous involves following the example of others.

We do not learn to be virtuous by following the example of anyone; we must follow the example of those who are virtuous. Confucius recognizes different levels of moral development. This is most prominent when he describes his own development, beginning with learning.

From fifteen, my heart-and-mind was set upon learning; from thirty I took my stance; from forty I was no longer doubtful; from fifty I realized the propensities of *tian* (*tianming*); from sixty my ear was attuned; from seventy I could give my heart-and-mind free rein without overstepping the boundaries.¹⁸⁶

Further evidence that Confucius acknowledges different levels of moral development is present elsewhere.

In the *Analects*, a contrast is made between two different levels of moral development: *xiao ren* and *jun zi*. *Jun zi* oftentimes is used in reference to

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 48.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 76-77 — Book II, 2.4.

virtuous or exemplary persons. An important point worth noting is that for Confucius, *jun zi* is not a position provided by birth right. Rather a person becomes a *jun zi* by habitually practicing virtuous activity. Hall and Ames make a similar observation in *Thinking Through Confucius*. “. . . Confucius eschewed the essentialist notion of quality by birth. *Chün tzu* [or *jun zi*] is a nobility of refinement rather than blood.”¹⁸⁷ *Xiao ren* literally means “small person.” *Xiao ren*, in contrast to *jun zi*, is used in reference to commoners or persons that are not virtuous. Some differences between *jun zi* and *xiao ren* are as follows. First, *jun zi* always apply what they learn in accordance with the Way (*dao*). When a person lives according to the Way, a *jun zi* never eats too much, does not ask for too much at home, is diligent in business, associates with those that possess the Way, and corrects one’s own faults. Confucius puts the matter in the following way:

In eating, exemplary persons (*junzi*) do not look for a full stomach, nor in their lodgings for comfort and contentment. They are persons of action yet cautious in what they say. They repair to those who know the way (*dao*), and find improvement in their company. Such persons can indeed be said to have a love of learning (*haoxue*).¹⁸⁸

Furthermore, a *jun zi* never stops pursuing *ren* or goodness, whereas the *xiao ren* always focuses on other matters. “Exemplary persons [*jun zi*] do not take leave

¹⁸⁷ David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames, *Thinking Through Confucius*, 164.

¹⁸⁸ Roger T. Ames and Henry Rosemont, Jr., ed., *The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation*, 74-75 — Book I, 1.14.

of their authoritative conduct [*ren*] even for the space of a meal. When they are troubled, they certainly turn to it, as they do in facing difficulties.”¹⁸⁹ Third, a *jun zi* is motivated by *de* (the virtuous or good), while a *xiao ren* is motivated by something less worthy. For instance, “Exemplary persons (*junzi*) cherish their excellence [*de*]; petty persons [*xiao ren*] cherish their land. Exemplary persons cherish fairness; petty persons cherish the thought of gain.”¹⁹⁰ Another difference between *jun zi* and *xiao ren* is that a *jun zi* desires to know what is right, while a *xiao ren* is interested in money or matters of personal interest. “Exemplary persons (*junzi*) understand what is appropriate (*yi*); petty persons understand what is of personal advantage (*li*),” says Confucius.¹⁹¹

Insofar as learning virtues is concerned, *jun zi* should be the ones teaching others to be virtuous. *Jun zi* know what constitutes virtuous acts and can teach others to be virtuous. Let us take some time to look at some other characteristics of *jun zi*. A *jun zi* is always motivated by *de*. Confucius says, “Exemplary persons (*junzi*) cherish their excellence [*de*] . . .”¹⁹² Ames and Rosemont translate *de* as excellence. Other popular translations of *de* include virtue, character, power, or integrity. In short, *de* is a virtuous quality that any good person has. Bryan W. Van Norden makes a similar observation in *Confucius and the Analects*.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 90 — Book IV, 4.5.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 91 — Book IV, 4.11.

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 92 — Book IV, 4.16.

¹⁹² Ibid., 91 — Book IV, 4.11.

He begins by pointing out what *de* originally meant. “*Dé* was from very early on (perhaps originally) a sort of charisma or power a king has over others, which causes them to willingly follow him, without the need for physical coercion.”¹⁹³

Van Norden proceeds by contrasting what *de* meant with how Confucius chooses to use the term. “By the time of Confucius, *dé* had come to be thought of as a quality of not only a good king, but of any truly good person.”¹⁹⁴

In addition to being virtuous and being motivated by *de*, *jun zi* always apply what they learn, in accordance with the *dao*. Recall that *dao* has several related meanings; a couple of these meanings are: the way of the Zhou dynasty and the correct way to do something. *Jun zi* live according to the way or path, always behave appropriately in the company of others, and associate with other persons following the way. “In eating, exemplary persons (*junzi*) do not look for a full stomach, nor in their lodgings for comfort and contentment. They are persons of action yet cautious in what they say. They repair those who know the way (*dao*), and find improvement in their company.”¹⁹⁵

Returning to the point of learning to be virtuous, people learn to be virtuous by following the examples of those who are already virtuous. Virtuous persons motivate not only people of lower moral development to act virtuously,

¹⁹³ Bryan W. Van Norden, ed., *Confucius and the Analects: New Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 21.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁵ Roger T. Ames and Henry Rosemont, Jr., ed., *The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation*, 74-75 — Book I, 1.14.

but also, virtuous persons encourage fellow virtuous persons to act virtuously. May Sim, in "The Moral Self in Confucius and Aristotle," claims that the way in which virtuous persons get others to be virtuous is by inspiration. "Not only are exemplary persons [*jun zi*] the cause of other exemplary persons and the key to the proper functioning of society, Confucius also maintains that they affect others' proper actions in a natural way by being inspirational rather than coercive."¹⁹⁶ By acting virtuously, virtuous persons motivate others to do virtuous acts. So, people can learn to be virtuous by following the example of *jun zi*.

Let me say a bit more about following the examples of virtuous persons. Instead of living by prescriptive rules of conduct, Confucius encourages people to live by emulation, in particular, moral emulation. As Chad Hansen, in "Freedom and Moral Responsibility in Confucian Ethics," puts the matter, "The Confucian alternative is teaching through moral example or model emulation, a technique which specifically dispenses with fixed rules. Even when virtue is to be learned through books, the medium is not rules but stories and description of models."¹⁹⁷ In particular, people learn to live by following the example of *jun zi*,

¹⁹⁶ May Sim, "The Moral Self in Confucius and Aristotle," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 43 (December 2003): 450.

¹⁹⁷ Chad Hansen, "Freedom and Moral Responsibility in Confucian Ethics," *Philosophy East and West* 22 (1972): 174.

virtuous or exemplary persons. An exemplary or virtuous person always pursues *ren*.

A Comparison of Aristotle's and Confucius' Approaches to Virtue Ethics

Though Aristotle and Confucius seemed to live worlds apart, they share some important insights regarding virtue ethics. This is the topic of discussion in the next chapter. Both Aristotle and Confucius begin with a conception of the good. They start with the good for humankind. From there, they claim that we must perform certain actions to become good persons or persons of good character. Finally, they both claim that education is needed for knowing how people ought to act.

Chapter 6 — Aristotle and Confucius on Virtue Ethics

Aristotle and Confucius appear to be worlds apart. Aristotle was born in Stagira, on the eastern coast of the peninsula of Chalcidice, in Thrace. He lived from 384/3 – 322 B.C. In contrast, Confucius was born in the state of Lu, located in what is currently the Shantung Province. He lived from 551 – 479 B.C. Though Aristotle and Confucius lived at different times and different places, they share some important similarities in their approach to virtue ethics.

A point worth noting is that by claiming that they share important similarities, I am not thereby claiming that Aristotle and Confucius have no differences in approach. By observing what the two philosophers share in common insofar as virtue ethics is concerned, we stand to benefit from such a comparison. Certainly, we realize that though these philosophers lived at different times and such different locations, they share similar concerns. And, perhaps, such a comparison offers a fuller or more robust understanding of virtue ethics.

In this chapter, three main comparisons will be made between Aristotle's and Confucius' approaches to virtue ethics. First, both philosophers begin with the good. Aristotle talks about the highest good, which is happiness. Confucius does not talk about the highest good, but he does conceive the good in terms of virtues. Second, they both emphasize the importance of activity in living a good

life. Finally, according to Aristotle and Confucius, education plays a crucial role in virtue ethics.

Virtue Ethics and the Good for Humankind

In their discussions of virtue ethics, both Aristotle and Confucius begin with the conception of the good, in particular, the good for humankind. They determine what sort of lives people should live to have good lives or to become good persons. Performing certain acts consistently and habitually is necessary for building a character of goodness, according both of these philosophers.

As for a conception of the good, Aristotle looks for the highest good. Happiness, he claims is the highest good. The highest good, as we have seen, includes intellectual activity, virtuous activity, and friendship. Though not a part of the nature of happiness, external goods are also required for happiness to be possible.

What Confucius shares in common with Aristotle is not the view that happiness is the highest good for humankind. In fact, Confucius does not even speak of the highest good. Nonetheless, Confucius values the importance of virtue ethics. Living the good life is very important. We must pursue activities that help us become good persons. And for both Aristotle and Confucius, such

activities include virtuous activity. Exactly what do they share in common insofar as virtue ethics is concerned?

Virtue

Let us begin the discussion with a definition of virtue. Alasdair MacIntyre, in *After Virtue*, defines virtue succinctly: “A virtue is an acquired human quality the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which effectively prevents us from achieving any such goods.”¹⁹⁸ Bina Gupta, in *Ethical Questions: East and West*, makes three observations regarding this definition. The first observation is that virtue is not a quality with which we are born. “First, it is an acquired human quality.”¹⁹⁹ The second observation is that virtue involves activity. “Second, it concerns practices; just recall constant Aristotelian comparison of virtue with excellence of a violinist.”²⁰⁰ The third observation is that by pursuing virtuous activity, the result is that which is good for humankind. “Third, what one achieves thereby, according to MacIntyre, are goods internal to the practice. By this one excludes any external reward, praise, and other material benefits. What one gets is the

¹⁹⁸ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* 2nd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 191.

¹⁹⁹ Bina Gupta, ed., *Ethical Questions: East and West* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2002), 146.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

satisfaction, the Aristotelian *eudaimonia*, and the simple happiness . . .”²⁰¹ With all this in mind, let us take a closer look at how Aristotle and Confucius define virtue.

Aristotle and Confucius define virtue as a mean. Let us first examine what Aristotle says. He tells us that virtue is impaired by excess or deficiency in activity. Aristotle shows how this is the case by using bodily strength and health as illustrations. “First of all then we have to observe, that moral qualities are so constituted as to be destroyed by excess and by deficiency—as we see is the case with bodily strength and health (for one is forced to explain what is invisible by means of visible illustrations.”²⁰² Excess or deficiency in exercise destroys bodily strength. Likewise, excess or deficiency in food or drink destroys health. To use the words of Aristotle, “Strength is destroyed both by excessive and by deficient exercises, and similarly health is destroyed by too much and by too little food and drink; while they are produced, increased and preserved by suitable quantities.”²⁰³ It is not too difficult to see how this is the case. Take strength as an example. Without any exercise whatsoever, a person has very little strength. Walking up or down some flights of stairs might be difficult to a person who does absolutely no exercise. Even if such an individual is able to traverse some

²⁰¹ Ibid.

²⁰² Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, in The Loeb Classical Library, trans. by H. Rackham, ed. Jeffrey Henderson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), Book II Chapter 2, p. 77 — 1104a12-15.

²⁰³ Ibid., Book II Chapter 2, p. 77 — 1104a15-17.

flights of stairs, that person may be out of breath and exhausted after doing so.

Too much exercise proves to be problematic albeit for a slightly different reason.

Too much exercise, whether in cardiovascular workout or in lifting weights, thins out a person's strength. Too much exercise can burden the heart and overwork muscles, thus weakening a person's strength.

Just as excess or deficiency in exercise destroys bodily strength and excess or deficiency in food or drink destroys health, so too, excess or deficiency destroys virtue. Take courage for instance. Too much fear or too little fear and too little confidence or too much confidence destroys the virtue of courage.

The same therefore is true of Temperance, Courage, and the other virtues. The man who runs away from everything in fear and never endures anything becomes a coward; the man who fears nothing whatsoever but encounters everything becomes rash.²⁰⁴

Likewise, too much or too little pleasure destroys the virtue of temperance.

Similarly he that indulges in every pleasure and refrains from none turns out a profligate, and he that shuns all pleasure, as boorish persons do, becomes what may be called insensible. Thus Temperance and Courage are destroyed by excess and deficiency, and preserved by the observance of the mean.²⁰⁵

Virtue, then, is a mean between the two extremes or vices, excess and deficiency. The mean, however, is not to be construed merely as some sort of quantitative notion whereby virtue is defined as some degree of moderation.

²⁰⁴ Ibid., Book II Chapter 2, p. 77 — 1104a17-23.

²⁰⁵ Ibid., Book II Chapter 2, p. 77 — 1104a23-27.

Jiyuan Yu, in “The Aristotelian Mean and Confucian Mean,” also expresses a concern with defining mean in terms of moderation. “Yet this interpretation of the mean as moderation not only has difficulty squaring with various textual evidence, but it also fails to make sense of Aristotle’s general position that the mean is virtue. It is not Aristotle’s view that virtue is simply a matter of moderation.”²⁰⁶ On the contrary, virtue lies in the middle, between two vices – excess and deficiency.

What does all this mean in terms of acting virtuously? Acting virtuously involves knowing the proper way to respond, the right attitude to carry, the right persons towards which to direct action, the proper time to act, etc., when acting. Courage,²⁰⁷ for example, is a virtue concerning feelings of fear and confidence, especially in battle. A courageous person avoids the excesses of cowardice and rashness. On one extreme is cowardice. A coward fears everything and fails to stand ground. On the other extreme is rashness. A rash person fears nothing and meets every danger. A courageous person knows exactly how much fear and confidence to exhibit and shows it in the appropriate way, given the circumstances. In general, a person living the good life consistently and habitually always knows how to properly respond in any given situation.

²⁰⁶ Jiyuan Yu, “The Aristotelian Mean and Confucian Mean,” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 29 (September 2002): 337.

²⁰⁷ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book III Chapter 6 — 1115a6-1116a14.

Let us now turn to what Confucius says about virtue as a mean. The term, *zhong*, which is translated as “mean,” literally means middle. Confucius actually says surprisingly little concerning the mean. Whatever the mean is, we know, at least from *The Doctrine of the Mean*, who practices the mean. Namely, *jun zi*, virtuous persons or superior persons, always act according to the mean. On the other hand, *xiao ren*, non-virtuous persons or ‘mean’ persons, act contrary to the mean. “The superior man’s [*jun zi*] embodying the course of the Mean is because he is a superior man [*jun zi*], and so maintains the Mean. The mean man’s acting contrary to the course of the Mean is because he is a mean man [*xiao ren*], and has no caution.”²⁰⁸

Moreover, we also know that *jun zi*, virtuous persons or persons of superior character, do not pursue extremes. Zigong, a disciple of Confucius who was an excellent statesman and merchant,²⁰⁹ asks Confucius who – Zizhang or Zixia – has superior character. Zizhang is known for caring more about appearances than substances²¹⁰, and Zixia was an individual criticized by

²⁰⁸ Confucius, “The Doctrine of the Mean,” in *Confucius: Confucian Analects, The Great Learning, and The Doctrine of the Mean*, transl. by James Legge (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1971), 386 — Chapter II, 2.2.

²⁰⁹ Roger T. Ames and Henry Rosemont, Jr., ed., *The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1998), 231, footnote #12 to Book I.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 234, footnote #37 to Book II.

Confucius “at times for being petty and narrow in his aspirations”²¹¹. Confucius responds by saying, “Zizhang oversteps the mark, and Zixia falls short of it.”²¹² We can say that virtue, for Confucius, as is the case for Aristotle, is a mean between extremes. Acting virtuously, for Confucius, involves, at the very least, acting in accordance with *li* or ritual propriety. Jiyuan Yu, in “The Aristotelian Mean and Confucian Mean,” is in agreement on this point and cites evidence in *The Book of Rites* for support. “It is reported that when asked directly about what determines the mean (*zhong*), Confucius says, ‘Do what the rites (*li*) require! For it is the rites that make the mean.’ . . . Confucius’s *li* has a particular reference to the *li* of the Zhou dynasty, his ideal social norms and ritual tradition.”²¹³

Acting virtuously involves more than acting according to *li*. Recall from a previous discussion that *li* must be practiced in conjunction with *ren* or authoritative conduct. *Li* by itself is meaningless. *Li* or ritual propriety must be practiced with good purpose, with authoritative conduct. In addition to practicing *li* and displaying *ren*, acting virtuously involves living in accordance with the *dao* and doing what is *yi*. In other words, a person acting virtuously also lives according to the way and does what is appropriate, respectively. For a

²¹¹ Ibid., 230, footnote #8 to Book I.

²¹² Roger T. Ames and Henry Rosemont, Jr., ed., *The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation*, 145 — Book XI, 11.16.

²¹³ Jiyuan Yu, “The Aristotelian Mean and Confucian Mean,” 349.

more detailed description of any of these concepts, seek details in the previous chapter.

One example of how a person should act virtuously is that children must observe ritual propriety with their parents. Children must show proper countenance towards their parents.²¹⁴ Even when the parents die, children must continue to show ritual propriety towards their parents, by burying them properly²¹⁵ and grieve the death of their parents for an appropriate amount of time²¹⁶. But children must not merely go through the motions of exercising ritual propriety towards their parents. They must genuinely respect their parents and act appropriately.

Now that we have a clearer view of what virtue is, we still need to examine how activity is crucial in becoming a good person. Performing virtuous acts, for both Aristotle and Confucius, are necessary for becoming good persons. This is what we shall discuss next.

The Importance of Activity in Becoming Good or Virtuous

Virtuous activity, according to Aristotle and Confucius, is not something people automatically know how to perform. Rather, virtuous activity must be

²¹⁴ Confucius, *The Analects*, Book II, 2.8.

²¹⁵ Confucius, *The Analects*, Book II, 2.5.

²¹⁶ Confucius, *The Analects*, Book IV, 4.20.

learned. For Aristotle and Confucius, emphasis is placed on action in cultivating virtues.

That a person learns to be virtuous by doing (virtuous activity) seems to be perfectly reasonable. Learning virtues can be likened to learning the arts or sports. A person learns to play tennis, for instance, by actually playing tennis. A person cannot learn to play tennis simply by watching a video of Vic Braden giving instructions on how to hit a forehand, a backhand, a volley, and a serve. A person must actually hold a tennis racket and learn to swing at an oncoming ball with the racket in hand. A combination of practicing hitting a ball with a racket and listening close to instruction helps a person learn to play tennis. Similarly, a person learns to play the piano not by merely listening to instructions. To learn to play the piano, after learning to differentiate the keys, a person must actually sit down at the piano or keyboard and play the different keys. In each of these activities, whether an individual is playing tennis or playing the piano, receiving regular instruction and practicing what one has learned, habitually and regularly, are necessary for truly learning to do these activities. A person that has picked up the racket only once in attempt to play or a person that has sat at the piano only once in attempt to play can hardly be called a tennis player or a piano player, respectively.

Just as a person learns to play tennis or play the piano by actually practicing, so, too, individuals learn the virtues by doing virtuous acts. People cannot truly learn the virtues by instruction alone, although instruction is important. Learning the virtues involves activity, in particular, doing virtuous acts. An individual must practice virtuous acts regularly and habitually to become virtuous.

Aristotle contrasts learning the virtues from having the senses, which we use because we are in possession of them. Instead, he compares learning to do what is virtuous with learning construction or learning a musical instrument.

The virtues on the other hand we acquire by first having actually practised them, just as we do the arts. We learn an art or craft by doing the things that we shall have to do when we have learnt it: for instance men become builders by building houses, harpers by playing the harp. Similarly we become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts.²¹⁷

For Confucius, too, cultivating virtues involves action. One telling indication is that whether persons are virtuous, claims Confucius, can be judged by their actions. "Watch their actions, observe their motives, examine wherein they dwell content; won't you know what kind of person they are? Won't you know what kind of person they are?"²¹⁸ Confucius says a bit more about learning to be virtuous. People, in learning to be virtuous, must do more than

²¹⁷ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, in The Loeb Classical Library, trans. by H. Rackham, ed. Jeffrey Henderson, Book II Chapter 1, p. 73 — 1103a33-b3.

²¹⁸ Roger T. Ames and Henry Rosemont, Jr., ed., *The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1998), 78 — Book II, 2.10.

utter responses or promises. Virtuous persons, for instance, are known not only for what they say, but more for what they do. “They [exemplary persons or *jun zi*] first accomplish what they are going to say, and only then say it.”²¹⁹ Now that we realize the importance of activity in learning to be virtuous, let us discuss the importance of education in becoming virtuous.

The Importance of Education in Learning How and Why Acts are Virtuous

Education plays an important role in becoming virtuous as well. Virtuous persons know what is virtuous and what makes something virtuous. Not all persons are virtuous, however. People must learn to recognize the virtuous and how an act is virtuous. Certainly, Aristotle and Confucius recognize that people are at varying levels of moral development. Persons ranking lowest in moral development are incapable of identifying what is virtuous or why something is virtuous. The more mature moral individuals have a better grasp of ascertaining what is virtuous or what makes something virtuous. Morally mature persons understand what is virtuous and why something is virtuous. The various stages of moral development are discussed by both Aristotle and Confucius. Let us begin with Aristotle.

²¹⁹ Ibid., 79 — Book II, 2.13.

Aristotle recognizes different levels or stages of moral development.²²⁰

Some individuals are motivated to act by pleasure and pain. These individuals do not respond to reason, but rather, act upon pain or pleasure. Aristotle calls persons on this level of moral development base. “. . . the base, whose desires are fixed on pleasure, must be chastised by pain, like a beast of burden.”²²¹ For instance, a child might be motivated to share her toys with her brothers and sisters by being told that she will not get any more toys unless she shares. She has no idea that sharing is good or why sharing is good. But, she shares in hopes of receiving what she desires – more toys in the future. This is the point during which persons first become aware of what is virtuous. M. F. Burnyeat, in “Aristotle on Learning to Be Good,” makes a similar observation. “It turns out that Aristotle is not simply giving us a bland reminder that virtue takes practice. Rather, practice has cognitive powers, in that it is the way we learn what is noble or just.”²²²

Beyond that stage of moral development, persons begin to identify the virtuous on their own. Like the previous stage, they practice virtuous acts regularly. However, these individuals still are not morally mature and can be tempted with pleasure or pain not to do what is virtuous. Persons in this stage of

²²⁰ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book X Chapter 9 — 1179b19-1180a19.

²²¹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, in The Loeb Classical Library, trans. by H. Rackham, ed. Jeffrey Henderson, Book X Chapter 9, p. 633 — 1180a10-13.

²²² M. F. Burnyeat, “Aristotle on Learning to Be Good,” in *Essays on Aristotle’s Ethics*, ed. Amélie Oksenberg Rorty (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 73.

moral development respond to reason as well as pleasure and pain, but they cannot explain why an act is virtuous. That is, they can identify what is virtuous but not why something is virtuous. Burnyeat describes this second stage of moral development like this: “This is not yet to know *why* it is true, but it is to have *learned that* it is true in the sense of having made the judgment your own, second nature to you — Hesiod’s taking to heart.”²²³

In contrast to the other stages of moral development, mature moral persons are focused on the good, understand the good, are motivated by the good, and do what is good. Mature moral persons know what is virtuous and why it is virtuous. They respond to reason completely, not giving in to any promises of pain or pleasure. To use the words of Aristotle, “. . . [T]he virtuous man, who guides his life by moral ideals, will be obedient to reason . . .”²²⁴ Those that understand the virtuous and act without succumbing to pleasure or pain are difficult to find. Aristotle sees that this is the case and insists that laws must be in place to motivate persons, especially those that are weak-willed, to do what is virtuous.²²⁵ One indication of this is when Aristotle says the following:

But to resume: if, as has been said, in order to be good a man must have been properly educated and trained, and must subsequently continue to follow virtuous habits of life, and to do nothing base whether voluntarily or involuntarily, then this will be secured if

²²³ Ibid., 74.

²²⁴ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, in The Loeb Classical Library, trans. by H. Rackham, ed. Jeffrey Henderson, Book X Chapter 9, p. 633 — 1180a13-14.

²²⁵ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book X Chapter 9 — 1180a14-b28.

men's lives are regulated by a certain intelligence, and by a right system, invested with adequate sanctions.²²⁶

Persons who exhibit a weakness of will, *akrasia*, can know what the virtuous act is and why the act is virtuous without performing the virtuous act; but, such persons are not mature moral persons.

That Aristotle can account for *akrasia* or weakness of will is a point not to be overlooked. Unlike Plato, Aristotle can account for a weakness of will. Plato could not account for weakness of will, since to know what is good is to do what is good. On the other hand, persons can know what is virtuous or good without doing what is virtuous or good, according to Aristotle. In particular, he associates persons who exhibit weakness of will with succumbing to pleasures or pains of touch and taste.

But in relation to the pleasures and pains of touch and taste, and the corresponding desires and acts of avoidance . . . it is possible on the one hand to have such a disposition as to succumb even to those temptations to which most men are superior, or on the other hand to conquer even those to which most men succumb.²²⁷

So, it is possible that a person knows what is virtuous but fails to do what is virtuous when tempted by pleasure. Persons who know what is virtuous but do not do what is virtuous simply have not reached the highest level of moral development.

²²⁶ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, in The Loeb Classical Library, trans. by H. Rackham, ed. Jeffrey Henderson, Book X Chapter 9, p. 633 — 1180a14-19.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, Book VII Chapter 7, pp. 411 & 413 — 1150a9-15.

Aristotle is not the only one who acknowledges different levels of moral development; Confucius also recognizes different levels of moral development. As a reminder from the previous chapter, that there are different levels of moral development is most prominent when Confucius described his own development, beginning with learning. “From fifteen, my heart-and-mind was set upon learning; from thirty I took my stance; from forty I was no longer doubtful; from fifty I realized the propensities of *tian* (*tianming*); from sixty my ear was attuned; from seventy I could give my heart-and-mind free rein without overstepping the boundaries.”²²⁸

Another way in which Confucius illustrates different levels of moral development is by contrasting *jun zi* from *xiao ren*. *Jun zi* never stop pursuing goodness, but, on the other hand, *xiao ren* focus on other matters. “Exemplary persons [*jun zi*] do not take leave of their authoritative conduct [*ren*] even for the space of a meal. When they are troubled, they certainly turn to it, as they do in facing difficulties.”²²⁹ Moreover, virtuous person or *jun zi* are motivated by *de* or the virtuous. In contrast, *xiao ren* are motivated by that which is less worthy. Some examples in the *Analects* are as follows: “Exemplary person (*junzi*) cherish

²²⁸ Roger T. Ames and Henry Rosemont, Jr., ed., *The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation*, 76-77 — Book II, 2.4.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, 90 — Book IV, 4.5.

their excellence [*de*]; petty persons [*xiao ren*] cherish their land. Exemplary persons cherish fairness; petty persons cherish the thought of gain.”²³⁰

The point, regarding learning how and why acts are virtuous, is that virtuous persons should be the ones doing the educating. Virtuous persons know how acts are virtuous and why acts are virtuous. Thus, they are the best teachers to those who are learning to live the good life or those who are learning to be virtuous.

The Importance of Laws and the Enforcement of Laws to Motivate People to become Virtuous

Obviously, those who are already virtuous do not need to be motivated to do what is virtuous. Virtuous persons do what is virtuous for the sake of the good or because they are virtuous. What about persons that are not the most morally mature? How do these people become more morally mature persons?

According to both Aristotle and Confucius, people who are not morally mature must be encouraged to do what is virtuous by laws and the enforcement of laws and sanctions. Let us examine what Aristotle says on the matter. People who are not morally mature, to some extent, are motivated by pleasure and pain. The law defines what people should and should not do.

²³⁰ Ibid., 91 — Book IV, 4.11.

And it is difficult to obtain a right education in virtue from youth up without being brought up under right laws; for to live temperately and hardily is not pleasant to most men, especially when young; hence the nurture and exercises of the young should be regulated by law, since temperance and hardiness will not be painful when they have become habitual.²³¹

People are rewarded for pursuing activity in accordance with the law.

Conversely, people are punished for breaking the law. By consistently following the law, then people's pattern of behavior becomes habitual, and people are regularly and consistently performing virtuous acts.

Nonetheless the youth or children are not the only individuals that need guidance of the law in doing virtuous acts. Adults fall short of the highest level of moral development as well.

But doubtless it is not enough for people to receive the right nurture and discipline in youth; they must also practise the lessons they have learnt, and confirm them by habit, when they are grown up. Accordingly we shall need laws to regulate the discipline of adults as well, and in fact the whole life of the people generally; for the many are more amenable to compulsion and punishment than to reason and to moral ideals.²³²

Any persons who are not virtuous do not act according to reason alone and can give in to pleasure or pain. Thus, such persons' actions must be regulated and guided by the law.

²³¹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, in The Loeb Classical Library, trans. by H. Rackham, ed. Jeffrey Henderson, Book X Chapter 9, p. 631 — 1179b32-1180a1.

²³² *Ibid.*, Book X Chapter 9, pp. 631 & 633 — 1180a2-6.

Confucius makes a similar point insofar as he believes that laws should regulate and guide the behavior of persons who are not virtuous. Like Aristotle, Confucius notes that persons who are not virtuous are oftentimes motivated to act by pleasure or pain.

Lead the people with administrative injunctions (*zheng*) and keep them orderly with penal law (*xing*), and will avoid punishments but will be without a sense of shame. Lead them with excellence (*de*) and keep them orderly through observing ritual propriety (*li*) and they will develop a sense of shame, and moreover, will order themselves.²³³

Not only do people have the law to regulate and guide their actions, but also, they are motivated to do what is virtuous or good by following the example of *jun zi* performing virtuous acts.

We have taken a look at the importance of activity in the process of learning to be virtuous, for Aristotle and for Confucius. Instruction or teaching alone is not sufficient for persons to learn to be virtuous. People must also regularly and habitually perform virtuous acts. However, in the process of practicing virtuous acts, not everyone is motivated to do what is virtuous. In fact, some are not aware of what is virtuous or why a given act is virtuous. People must be instructed what is virtuous and why acts are virtuous. As for getting people to do what is virtuous, the use of pleasure and pain, via the

²³³ Roger T. Ames and Henry Rosemont, Jr., ed., *The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation*, 76 — Book II, 2.3.

enforcement of laws, encourages people to do what is virtuous. Laws not only serve to guide actions of the youth and to encourage them to do virtuous acts habitually and consistently, but also, laws function to regulate the actions of adults as well.

In conclusion, in this chapter, we compared Aristotle's and Confucius' approaches to virtue ethics and saw how they are broadly similar. Both Aristotle and Confucius define virtue as a mean between extremes. An emphasis is placed on activity. Virtuous acts must be practiced habitually and consistently. Performing virtuous acts, for Aristotle, involves responding in the proper way, with the right attitude, towards the right persons, at the proper time, etc. Acting virtuously, for Confucius, involves acting with *li* or ritual propriety, being *ren* or authoritative in conduct, living in accordance with the *dao*, and doing what is *yi* or appropriate. These activities are necessary for becoming good persons, according to Aristotle and Confucius, respectively.

Chapter 7 — Conclusion

As I began this dissertation, my interest was defining the good life. The topic, what constitutes a good life, has captured the attention of people eons ago but continues to hold the interest of people now. The good life, many believe, involves happiness. Exactly what constitutes happiness has been more controversial. Aristotle, I believe, offers the best account of happiness. Happiness, according to Aristotle, is not reducible merely to physical pleasure. On the contrary, happiness is a much more complicated concept, having to do, in part with the characteristic function of human beings. The purpose of this dissertation was to explicate Aristotle's conception of highest good for humankind, happiness. The majority of this dissertation was dedicated to defining happiness.

Intellectual Activity, Virtuous Activity, & the Nature of Happiness

To begin with, the nature of happiness includes, but is not limited to, two activities: intellectual activity and virtuous activity. Two criteria are used to determine the nature of happiness, *teleion* and *autarkeias*, final or complete and self-sufficient, respectively. A good that is final or complete without qualification is always chosen for its own sake and never for the sake of something else. Some goods, such as money, are goods we pursue solely for the

sake of other goods, such as security and pleasure. In contrast, other goods, such as friendship or virtue, are pursued both for their own sake and for the sake of some other good, such as happiness. Happiness, however, is the only good that is chosen for its own sake and never for the sake of something else.

The second criterion of happiness is self-sufficiency. Self-sufficiency is not to be interpreted as applying to an individual living in complete solitude. A good that is self-sufficient is worth choosing for its own sake. Happiness is self-sufficient insofar as it makes life lacking in nothing.

Understanding the *ergon* argument is crucial to comprehending how intellectual activity and virtuous activity are part of the nature of happiness. The *ergon* of human beings or the characteristic activity of human beings has to do with our reasoning capacity. The characteristic activity of human beings cannot be nutrition and growth, because plants share in this activity. Moreover, the characteristic activity of human beings cannot be sensation, since other animals share this experience. Hence, claims Aristotle, the characteristic activity must involve the activity of reasoning.

When Aristotle claims that the activity of reasoning is the characteristic activity of human beings, he is not thereby claiming that rational activity is distinctive to human beings of all things. Rather, insofar as the natural world is concerned, rational activity is unique to human beings. Such an explanation fits

with the fact that later on in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle compares human beings with the gods, namely, gods and human beings both participate in the activity of reasoning.

The activity of reasoning is used in at least two activities: intellectual reasoning and practical reasoning. Regarding the former, Aristotle claims that a life that includes contemplation is the best sort of life, and a life that includes contemplation is better than a life without any contemplation or theoretical reasoning. One of the most important activities involving intellectual reasoning is intellectual or philosophical activity.

Regarding contemplation or intellectual reasoning itself, it is final and self-sufficient. Contemplation is final, given that it is always desired for its own sake and never for the sake of something else. Contemplation is self-sufficient, in that it is worth choosing for its own sake. What Aristotle means by contemplation or intellectual reasoning is reasoning for the sake of knowledge or knowing for knowledge's sake.

The *ergon* of human beings or the activity of reasoning is also used in practical reasoning. One of the most important activities involving practical reasoning is virtuous activity. Aristotle stresses the importance of action or doing what is virtuous.

Of two main types of virtue, intellectual virtues and moral virtues, the *ergon* of human beings plays an important role in the practice of moral virtue. People have to use their reasoning capacity to perform virtuous activity. Persons learn to do acts by repetition, by doing virtuous acts consistently and regularly. Only by doing so, a person becomes virtuous.

Virtue, for Aristotle, is a disposition of the soul. It is a state of character, in virtue of which we stand well or badly with reference to emotions. Virtue, then, is a state of character, in which we have a disposition to choose the mean between extremes, the mean between excess and deficiency. Specifically, moral virtue is a state of character in which we use our reasoning faculty to deliberate and determine what choice to make in any circumstance.

That happiness consists of intellectual reasoning is not controversial. However, that happiness also includes practical reasoning is highly debatable. Some claim that happiness consists of intellectual reasoning exclusively, and such a claim is maintained on the basis of a few points. Happiness is the highest good. Only highest goods constitute the nature of happiness. Intellectual activity is the highest good. Though Aristotle does affirm intellectual activity as the highest good, that piece of evidence is not enough to demonstrate that the nature of happiness consists of intellectual activity exclusively. He explicitly claims that certain beings do not qualify as happy if they do not participate in

virtuous activity. Animals, such as oxen or horses, cannot qualify as happy.

And, given Aristotle's conception of happiness, neither are children happy, given that they are not yet engaging in virtuous activity. Not only are children not yet capable of engaging in virtuous activity, but also, children are not yet able to participate in intellectual activity. Thus, we can understand why Aristotle claims that children cannot be happy.

Besides the fact that Aristotle says that beings that do not participate in virtuous activity do not qualify as happiness, two other pieces of evidence lend favor to my interpretation that virtuous activity is part of the nature of happiness. First, happiness is a good of the soul and the nature of happiness includes goods of the soul exclusively. Intellectual activity, virtuous activity, and friendship are goods of the soul; unlike other goods, such as wealth or well-being, which is an external good and bodily good respectively. Goods of the soul, according to Aristotle, are good in the fullest sense and in the highest degree. So, virtuous activity is part of the nature of happiness. Second, in his discussion of the popular views of happiness, in a rejoinder to a popular view that happiness is virtue, Aristotle says that insofar as the activity of virtue includes being virtuous, he is in agreement. Happiness, then, involves doing virtuous acts regularly and consistently. Hence, those two pieces of evidence together show how virtuous activity is a part of the nature of happiness.

Friendship and the Nature of Happiness

Intellectual activity and virtuous activity alone, nonetheless, do not constitute the nature of happiness. Friendship also is part of the nature of happiness, according to Aristotle. In particular, not just any sort of friendship, but, virtuous friendship is part of the nature of happiness.

Friendships, in general, must fulfill three conditions, according to Aristotle. First, friends must feel good will towards each other and wish each other's good. Second, friends must be aware of each other's good will. Third, the cause of the good will must be one of the loveable qualities mentioned – utility, pleasure, or virtue, depending on the type of friendship.

Of the three main types of friendship – utility friendship, pleasure friendship, and virtuous friendship – utility friendships and pleasure friendships are inferior types of friendship while virtuous friendship are the truest or most perfect form of friendship. In contrast to utility friendships and pleasure friendships, a virtuous friendship can occur only between two good or virtuous persons. What motivates a good person to form a virtuous friendship with another good person involves loving what is good and desiring goodness for the other person.

Virtuous friendship, as I understand Aristotle, is not merely needed for happiness; virtuous friendship is part of the nature of happiness. Virtuous friendship, according to Aristotle, is a good of the soul. The goodness of a friend is like the goodness of the self, in a virtuous friendship. Both persons in a virtuous friendship pursue goods of the soul, by engaging in intellectual activity and virtuous activity. Moreover, a virtuous person finds the virtuous or the good pleasant and desirable. Given that each person in a virtuous friendship is virtuous, each appreciates and enjoys the other's companionship. In addition, by actively engaging in virtuous friendships, people can more fully exercise their reasoning ability and participate more wholly in intellectual activity and virtuous activity.

To deny that virtuous friendship is part of the nature of happiness is to misunderstand the true meaning of virtuous friendship and to overlook what Aristotle means by happiness. Recall that the nature of happiness is final and self-sufficient. At the very least, a life without virtuous friendship fails the self-sufficiency criterion; a life without virtuous friendship is not lacking in nothing. Aristotle even goes so far as to say that happy persons must have virtuous friends, without which the person's life is incomplete.

External Goods Needed for Happiness

What has been established is that intellectual activity, virtuous activity, and virtuous friendship constitute the nature of happiness. Though other goods do not count as part of the nature of happiness, some goods — external goods — are necessary for happiness. External goods are not essential to happiness, but, they make happiness possible. External goods include friends, wealth, political power, good birth, satisfactory children, and beauty.

The first three external goods: friends, wealth, and political power, are important to performing certain virtuous activities. Regarding friends, friends are required for virtuous activity affiliated with social intercourse. The term, friends, here does not refer to friendship that meets the three qualities of friendship: feeling good will for each other, being aware of each other's good will, and having the cause of their good will be utility, pleasure, or virtue. Rather, the term, friends, is being used to refer to kindly feeling, existing even between business associates or fellow citizens. At any rate, there are at least three virtuous activities affiliated with social intercourse. First, friends are necessary for acting with the social grace of friendliness, because a person must have an opportunity to practice such a virtue and a friend provides such an opportunity. Friends also are needed for a person to be truthful towards another. That is, a person needs to have the opportunity to be truthful, and a

friend provides such an opportunity. Third, to be witty, a person must have an audience, and a person must have friends with whom she can be witty. So, a person needs friends with whom to be witty.

As for the second external good, wealth or fortune enables a person to participate in virtuous activities concerning money: liberality and magnificence. A liberal person gives the right amount to the right person, at the right time, under appropriate circumstances. Having wealth or fortune is needed for a person to be able to give money to the right persons, in the right amounts, at the right time. A magnificent person spends her money well, in appropriate ways, on appropriate things. For a person to spend significant amounts of money in a suitable fashion, that person must be in possession of significant amounts of money; hence, fortune is necessary for a person to practice magnificence.

As for the third external good necessary for performing virtuous activity, political power is needed for honor to be possible. Participating in some sort of political office provides a person with the opportunity to engage in activity concerning honor. Another way of explaining how political power is necessary for happiness is by recognizing that human beings are political by nature and as political animals we must live and be part of a city-state. Exercising political power means that, as citizens of a city-state, persons must do actions that exhibit greatness of soul. Persons must be concerned with doing what is honorable:

helping others whenever possible, returning services done for them, and rarely asking for help.

Regarding the latter three external goods — good birth, satisfactory children, and beauty — none of these external goods is needed for performing virtuous activity per se. But, a tremendous loss in any of these three external goods, according to Aristotle, affects a person's happiness. Though none of these three external goods play any direct role in helping a person perform virtuous acts, the absence of any of these goods prevents a person from being able to act virtuously.

Confucius

Just as Aristotle was concerned with the good for humankind, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, so, too, Confucius was concerned with the good for humankind. Confucius, nonetheless, took a slightly different approach to the discussion of the good for humankind. Instead of looking for the highest good for humankind and developing a conception of the good for humankind from it, Confucius focused on searching for a solution to the misery people were experiencing during his time. Confucius' solution involves returning to the practices of the Zhou dynasty. Practicing *li* or ritual propriety of the Zhou

dynasty, acting with *ren* or authoritative conduct, living according to the *dao* or the way, and doing what is *yi* or appropriate are key to living the good life.

People learn to be virtuous through the instruction of others. Instruction alone, however, will not teach a person to be virtuous. People learn to be virtuous through action. A person must practice ritual propriety, act with authoritative conduct, live according to the way, and do what is appropriate regularly and consistently. And, a person should refrain from activities that prevent her from living a good life or becoming a good person. Such activities include focusing on petty matters.

Aristotle and Confucius on Virtue Ethics

Aristotle and Confucius make rather important points regarding the good for humankind and the good life. Doing activities that help a person live the good life and abstaining from activities that hinder a person from living the good life are significant. Practice of these activities, nonetheless, cannot be sporadic and spontaneous. A person must participate in certain activities habitually and consistently for that person to develop the character of a good person.

For Aristotle, such activities include engaging in intellectual activity, participating in virtuous activity, having virtuous friendships, and possessing external goods. According to Confucius, activities necessary for developing the

character of a good person includes virtuous activity. Virtuous activity includes practicing *li*, acting with *ren*, living according to the *dao*, and doing what is *yi*.

The common thread running in both Aristotle and Confucius's approaches to the good life is virtuous activity. Habitually and consistently doing virtuous activity is needed for the good life. Hence, according to Aristotle and Confucius, a good person is an individual who has the disposition to do the good act or the virtuous act in various circumstances, habitually does what is virtuous, and is motivated by the good.

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